

# Getting The Help You Need

For Your

## Struggling Learner



BY

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# Introduction

What if I were to ask you, “What is your biggest struggle in homeschooling your struggling learner?” What would you say?

- a) **Vague unease.** I know something’s not right, but I don’t know for sure what it is. I’m not sure if it’s something to be concerned about, or if he’ll just grow out of it.
- b) **Frustration.** I know my child is smart. The problem is that he only seems to be smart on select days. What seems like an easy lesson one day is totally lost the next day.
- c) **Exhaustion, coupled with defeat.** I’ve tried so many different things but nothing seems to work. He’s in fifth grade and still can’t really read, spell, or do math.
- d) **Confusion.** I know something’s going on, but I have no idea where to turn for help.

I know those feelings. I’ve experienced every one of them. I’ve walked the road of homeschooling a struggling learner. I’m still walking it today, but the Lord has blessed me with another child down the line who had even more going on that would affect learning and education. It wasn’t until I had my fifth child that I began to understand how to really help my second child. After years of unease, frustration, exhaustion, and confusion, I have found answers.

This report covers the who, what, when, where, why, and how of struggling learners. It serves as a high-level road map for identifying problems and finding the help that you need.

## Who

This report is written for the child who is behind in school, and probably has no medical diagnosis for any condition or syndrome. Many times, these kids have issues, but fly under the radar of the medical establishment. Many homeschoolers do a lot of research to try and help their children. Their pediatricians may even be supportive, but they are not always directed to sources that offer solutions. I hope to fill that gap for you today.

## What

What is a learning delay? A learning delayed child is one who is not functioning at grade level, as identified by national norms. This may or may not be a cause for concern. Common sense tells us that all children develop at their own pace, and that boys and girls

develop in different areas first. A learning delay of a few months may not be of great concern, you can always hold the child back a year in school. But when the child starts getting more than a year behind, you will want to dig deeper. Based on my experience, this is what a learning delay looks like: the child learns, but it seems to take a lot more effort than it should, or the steps of learning are very small and progress very slowly over time.

## When

When should you seek help? When you know that something isn't quite right. Fair warning: your two greatest enemies will be pride and fear. Pride takes center stage when you begin to believe that being a homeschooler means you have to do it all, and by yourself. You think that you should be able to teach your child, and he is only behind because you haven't found the right curriculum, or you're not in tune with his learning style, or one of a dozen other reasons. All of those are lies. Put aside pride. Know when it's time to reach out.

The second greatest enemy is fear. And it is boosted by pride. The thinking goes something like this: If I reach out for help, that means I am not able to teach my child myself. I am not meeting the standard of all those reports that say homeschoolers do better than public school children on tests. It means I can't participate in co-ops and spelling bees and field trips or other events that require demonstrating academic excellence at or above grade level.

Another fear is getting caught in the public school net. If I seek help outside the homeschool community, what will happen to my child? If he or she is labeled, what do those labels mean for the future? Forego your fear to find solutions. There is hope.

## Where

There are several people you can contact to help you find your way through the struggling learner jungle. Here are four (words in italics are good search terms for further information):

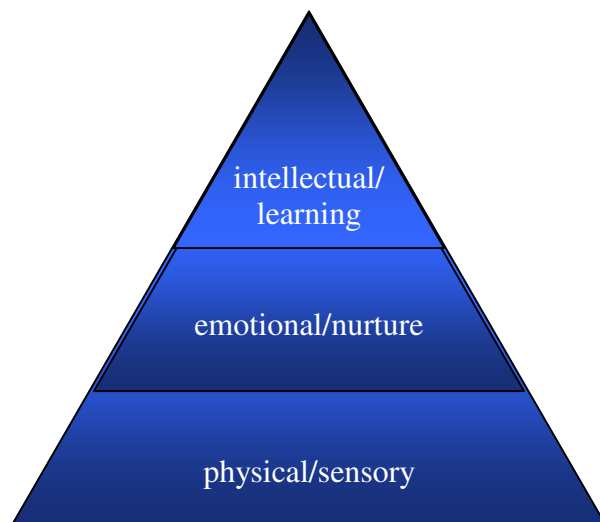
- *HSLDA Struggling Learner specialist* – these specialists have experience working with struggling learners and can often point you to homeschooling resources for your situation
- Your child's pediatrician – bring up any medical concerns you have such as allergies, need for therapy or other medical evaluations
- *Occupational Therapist* (OT) – a therapist who teaches practical life skills to those who are physically or mentally unable to do function in their world. These skills can include self care, work, leisure, and community activities. The therapist

can help remediate problems, or find suitable adaptations. A struggling learner often has problems that can be addressed through occupational therapy. They also address the area of *executive functioning*.

- **Neurologist** – a neurologist is a doctor who works with the nervous system. A neurologist can be helpful when working with a child who has *sensory integration* problems.

## Why

If your child is a borderline struggling learner, you may be wondering why you should go through all the trouble to get evaluations or pay for therapy. I tend to be frugal so that was a big factor in my decisions related to my struggling learner. I'd like to share something that made the decision of whether or not to seek help a lot easier. Below is a picture of a simplified hierarchy of needs, based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs.



For struggling learners, especially those with sensory problems, they tend to function in the bottom of the triangle. Having their senses off balance initiates their fright or flight instinct. As you can see from the graphic, if the student is still trying to control an out-of-balance sensory system, not much learning will be taking place. This also explains why the child seems to learn well one day, but forgets the material the next day. That one day when learning took place, his senses were probably under control, but were out of control again the next day.

I'll give you a little peek into our world. My teenage son has often described his sensory struggles to me with wild and wonderful language. As best I understand him, many days for him are like walking a tightrope where if he could....just....hold....everything....in....line....life can be bearable. He has been seeing an OT for almost two years now and she has done wonders working with him through music therapy and traditional OT.

## How

Finding where to get help is often the biggest hurdle to helping your struggling learner. I know this was the number one area where I struggled. I knew my son had problems, but I didn't know where to go for help. My first breakthrough came when I heard Dianne Craft speak at the HEAV homeschool convention. I had not intended to go to the convention that year, but when I saw her topics, I quickly registered. I went to all six of her seminars. At the end of the conference, I finally had some answers. I implemented her recommendations and my son began to come out of his learning coma. We made progress, and I was thrilled.

About this time, I had my daughter, whom we slowly realized had developmental delays. She sat up without support at almost a year. She walked at two and a half, and now at five years old, she still does not speak. Throughout our journey with her, I began to recognize similarities to my son's problems. We made the rounds of specialists and therapists, introducing me to the world of medical diagnoses and interventions. And I learned a whole new vocabulary. It was this vocabulary that had been lacking when I needed help for my son. I did not know that the problems he was experiencing had names, or that there were many people who were walking the same path. Once I knew the terminology, I could find the interventions and support I needed. I had entered the world of special learners.

Here is toolbox of learning tools and support for you to explore (italicized words are search terms you can use to help you find more information):

- ***Picture Exchange Communication System*** (PECS) – a system of communication developed for autistic children to help them communicate their needs, thoughts, and emotions. This system adapts beautifully for late talkers or nonverbal children. Although sign language is great, not everyone knows sign language. The universality of pictures makes communication easy on the child, parents, relatives and other caregivers.
- Nutrition – children with learning struggles often benefit from dietary changes. ***Dianne Craft*** addresses the ecology of the gut for learning struggles. You can address various areas (not necessarily all at the same time) related to diet to improve learning including: removing processed carbs, wheat/gluten, milk/casein (common culprits) and MSG and aspartame (neurotoxins).
- ***Special needs curriculum*** – There is a prevalent myth that struggling learners just need to go through the same curriculum as everyone else, only slower. That may work for some, but for others, it is simply prolonging the agony. Their brains work differently, meaning they benefit from different teaching methods. Yes, you can often use traditional curriculum, but you will have to break it down into much smaller steps of learning than a traditional book provides.
- Environmental factors – Struggling learners with ***sensory integration*** problems can sometimes be helped by adjusting small things in their environments. Here

are some things to look at: temperature, lighting (natural versus man-made), background sounds. Basically, anything perceived through the senses. Observe your student(s) to see what environment they like best for learning.

- **Sensory integration** problems – problems can occur with any of the seven senses. Two you may not be aware of are **proprioception** (body position) and **vestibular** (movement and balance). This area is huge for struggling learners.
- **Neurofeedback** (also known as **Neurobiofeedback**) – uses an EEG to view brain waves in real time with the goal of controlling them.
- iPads – these devices have become a real help for those with learning disabilities and limited communication. There are many apps that can help develop cognitive function and facilitate communication. Search on **autism and iPads** to get tons of good information on using the iPad for struggling learners. Even if your child does not have autism, these are the best search terms to ferret out the sites with helpful information.
- **Visual/right brain learning** strategies – most kids/people with learning struggles resort to right-brain learning strategies to cover up any problems. Since they gravitate toward this naturally, it makes sense to learn to teach to their strengths.
- Yahoo support groups for any of the above – you can find support groups all over the internet for these various areas. One of the best places to look is in **Yahoo groups**, especially those specifically for homeschoolers.

This document just touches the surface of how to work with your struggling learner, but the search terms should point you in the right direction to start figuring out the puzzle of what is going on with your struggling learner. For even more information on working with your struggling learner in your homeschool, visit [www.BusyHomeschooler.com](http://www.BusyHomeschooler.com).

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