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EVERY CHILD

Local authors push for better understanding of learning styles

By Sally James

Brock Eide, M.D., says that children can't wait for all the research to be conclusive on learning and the brain before they get help. Eide, a primary care doctor and his wife, neurologist Fernette Eide, M.D., have lived the frustration of seeing their own child struggle with traditional education.

Armed with an arsenal of knowledge and experience, the couple has written a book that translates brain discoveries into specific recommendations for tailoring learning to an individual child. In *The Mislabeled Child: How Understanding Your Child's Unique Learning Style Can Open the Door to Success* (Hyperion), the Edmonds couple explain what they call "neurolearning." It is their word for finding ways to leverage a child's brain strengths against his or her weaknesses.

The Eides, who run a clinic in Edmonds for evaluating children, have seen tremendous success with some of their patients. Both have been frequent lecturers nationwide to groups of teachers, parents, occupational therapists and speech pathologists.

Education tends to simplify and generalize -- resulting in regular education or special education, rather than 100 different "eds" to fit each child's brain strengths, Brock Eide says. "Truly, every child needs special education," he explains. "Huge numbers of children could do better, but they are just getting by in standard education." Many children fall just outside the definitions of disability that would qualify them for help in school, he says, adding that it falls to their parents to try to compensate and offer support.

Published this fall, *The Mislabeled Child* demystifies some of the architecture of learning. The authors hope it will help enable parents and teachers to problem-solve and modify academic tasks to fit their students' abilities.

Memory, the topic of the book's third chapter, lies at the bedrock of many learning disabilities. In one example, the authors quote evidence that a large percentage of kindergartners can only hold about nine words in what's called "working memory" at one time. If a teacher says a sentence made up of 14 words, a child may forget the beginning by the time she reaches the end. She won't understand what the teacher has said. As a result, the teacher might consider this child unable to focus at school, or she may even be labeled as having an "attention deficit."

What the Eides would say is that this child might have a small working memory and should probably do exercises to increase its size, as well as have her teacher provide instructions in smaller chunks.

Mislabeled that child can poison her self-esteem, and influence how she sees herself in a hundred tiny ways. "I'm not good at school," she might think.

While Fernette Eide says that subtle shift in labeling might be considered minor, it

can have a major impact on the way the child makes choices as she grows up.

Writing is another area where memory figures heavily and where some children begin to shut down in the classroom. Writing requires a complex dance of finger control, language and memory, executed in a precise sequence for fluency.

In their chapter on writing, the Eides help the reader try to tease out where the bumps are in the long road from imagined words to written sentences. Problems with fingers are motor problems. Problems with holding ideas in memory can be one of a whole palette of memory problems. Even visual weaknesses can masquerade as writing problems.

Recent research has shown that the brain is elastic: If one area is injured or works slowly, another area can often strengthen to overcome that. The Eides see that compensation ability as a major part of their own working philosophy. One side effect, according to Fernette, is that the Eides are now "more understanding of each other."

Fernette jokes that she is a "forgetful learner," who interrupts Brock frequently because she can't keep his multi-layered sentences in her working memory long enough to let him finish. Brock says he doesn't have Fernette's strength at skimming and speed-reading, which allows her to plow through hundreds of pages in an evening. "I have to hear every word in my head as I read," he says.

Other couples might marvel at the partnering abilities of this pair, who co-wrote a nearly 500-page book while home-schooling their two children, now ages 11 and 9. Not to mention running their clinic together for the past five years.

Do they talk about the brain while sorting laundry?

"Well," says Fernette, looking at Brock and smiling. "That would not be far from the truth of our household."

Sally James is a Seattle parent who writes frequently about medicine and science. Her Web site is www.nasw.org/users/sjames.

"Many children's learning difficulties are caused by highly specific problems affecting only one or a very few aspects of memory and information processing; yet these narrowly focused problems often coexist with intact memory skills that can be used for compensation. The tremendous diversity of memory routes means that there is often more than one way that a child can remember a given piece of information - like alternate roads she can use to get to her destination if her favorite route is blocked."

Excerpted from *The Mislabeled Child* by Brock Eide, M.D, M.A., and Fernette Eide, M.D. Copyright © 2006. Published by Hyperion.

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