

Understanding Non-Verbal Learning Disabilities

Last week the Edmonton Oilers defeated the Anaheim Mighty Ducks winning the Campbell Conference trophy. A smiling captain Jason Smith allowed his picture to be taken along side the trophy, but he did not touch it for fear that it would jinx the team in their effort to win the more coveted Stanley Cup. He was seeing a relationship that does not exist (disregarding for the moment that it is possible to mentally create an artificial negative relationship by psyching oneself out). Similarly, the inventors of astrology thought there was a relationship between the movement of the stars and peoples' personalities. We human beings have evolved the ability to see relationships between events and thus help control our destinies, but some people take this too far and see relationships that do not exist.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are people who fail to see relationships that clearly do exist. A young boy takes a toy from another with the result that the second boy becomes angry and hits him. If the first boy truly does not see the connection between his action and the subsequent angry response then he may have a neurological weakness in this ability to see relationships. We call this weakness a Non-Verbal Learning Disability (NLD).

It used to be called a "Math Disability", but NLD is not an academic neurological disorder. If a student cannot see the relationships between mathematical operations, he is going to have difficulty learning math beyond basic operations. He may memorize that you can move a decimal place one position by multiplying by 10, but because he fails to see the underlying mathematical relationship, he cannot see logically that you can, therefore, move the decimal two places by multiplying by 100. While NLD students often have excellent vocabularies and are good spellers, this difficulty in seeing relationships can make connecting paragraphs to build an essay or short story a frustrating experience. This same weakness contributes to social difficulties because relationships between intention and action, cause and effect, are dimly or incorrectly perceived. NLD students and adults often blame others, failing to see their own role in the social difficulties they face.

The first and most important step in overcoming this weakness is for NLD people to accept and understand their condition. Without this first step they are likely to continue the dead-end behavior of blaming others for their problems. Once they have come to accept their disability, then they may be open to trusting others to teach them those relationships between numbers, thoughts and actions that do not come easily for them. In the academic area, there are now some excellent computer programs that allow the student to see relationships visually, and to translate those relationships into outlines that can be used for studying or for essay writing. Counselling with an emphasis on social skills training can help the same individual become more successful in personal relationships.

With individualized instruction and guidance, NLD individuals can come to understand deeper meanings and general concepts. That instruction includes help in situating both assignments and social events within overall contexts using our human power to predict, logically, outcomes. A strategy that often benefits the NLD student involves the use of highlighting to identify the most important information in texts, notes, and on exams.

Since people with nonverbal learning disabilities are unable to process nonverbal communication and have difficulty conveying and interpreting emotion, they do not experience the benefits of the essential social cues that enable people to handle many social interactions effectively. The NLD individual needs assistance in developing the skill of highlighting important social cues, behaviors and utterances and separating those from social events that are not as important. With early diagnosis, people born with this weakness can become successful academically and socially.