Learning is an essential but complicated process that we follow life-long, from the moment we utter our first syllable to the time when we proudly hold high our college diplomas, and beyond- in our first job and subsequent ones, while teaching our children: the list continues...

In today’s world, unfortunately, ‘learning’ has become a one-size-fits-all process that is not tailored to suit a person’s abilities. This conformation of learning is especially true of our conventional school systems. The problem, however, is that not all children can adapt to such a rigid style of learning. Some children just cannot cope with the fast-paced and rigid approach that is characteristic of conventional teaching. Due to this, a gap forms between their true ability and their performance level and such children are then dubbed ‘Slow Learners’.

What does it mean to be a slow learner?
First and foremost, it is important to understand that slow learning is not a learning disability that can be classified as a diagnostic category. It is simply a term used to describe a student with the ability to acquire all necessary academic skills, but at a rate and depth below that of the average student. In order to grasp new concepts, a slow learner needs more time, more repetition, and often, more resources from teachers to be successful. Reasoning skills are typically delayed, which makes new concepts difficult to grasp.
What are some of the challenges, educational and otherwise, faced by slow learners?
Methodical classroom learning is progressive, which means that the acquisition of new skills will be based on already learnt concepts. When the majority of the class is moving at a quicker pace a slow learner tends to be left behind as he lacks some higher order thinking and reasoning skills. This formation of knowledge gaps in basic concepts and skills leads to a domino effect and manifests as a reduced comprehension ability across a wide spectrum of academic areas. The problem is progressive and should not be allowed to spiral out of control.

Our conventional school systems tend to ignore slow learners as other students in the class move at a different and faster pace. They are then dubbed as ‘failures’, ‘incapable’, or simply as not having sufficient IQ. What most people fail to understand is that the learning curve of the slow learner may be slow to begin with, but with sufficient remedial help, can soon resemble one of an average student. In most cases their learning curve is only delayed. For example, a slow learner maybe aged 20 or more when he completes high-school.

It’s also important to recognise that these students are typically keenly aware they are struggling with learning, and this can affect their self-confidence. Slow learners are prone to anxiety, negative self-image, and may be quick to give up. They often feel “unintelligent” and start resenting school. They spend all day doing something that is difficult for them and it can be very draining. They are often compulsive daydreamers who try to escape the struggles of the real world.

Slow learners also tend to struggle socially. In our judgmental society, they find it difficult to form close relationships and bond with children of their own age who fail to understand their special needs and simply look at them as ‘uninteresting or unworthy’ of friendship. In conventional schools, the lack of a close-knit friend circle can mean exclusion from extra-curricular activities, sports, and other leisurely activities. Unfortunately, this only aggravates the problem as they require these distractions so they do not dwell on their academic difficulties for too long. What many do not understand is that although slow learners may struggle academically, they can excel just as well as anyone else in other areas. This is why it is important to implement techniques such as multiple-intelligences at a young age and allow the child to get his feet wet in a wide range of activities. If the child shows interest in a non-traditional field, he should be encouraged to put an equal amount of effort into it. Non-academic strengths can boost the child’s self-confidence and can mask other social problems.
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Why are slow learners often not eligible for special education?

Special Education services are provided for students who have a disability. Slow learners typically do not have a disability, even though they need extra support. Their cognitive abilities are too high for them to be considered for an Intellectual Disability (Mental Retardation). However, their abilities are usually too low to be considered for a Learning Disability (difficulty with learning in a typical manner). Slow learners tend to perform at their ability level, which is below average.

Many parents opt to make their child repeat a few grades so that he is given more time to grasp the same concepts rather than being introduced to a cluster of new ones every year.

Another option is to enrol the child in the least demanding syllabus available and supplement classroom learning with one-on-one teaching by special educators and occupational therapists.

Slow learners vs. those with Learning Disabilities

A slow learner is a child whose thinking skills have developed significantly slower than the accepted norm for his age. This child will go through the same basic developmental stages as other children, but will do so at a significantly slower rate. However, this development, while being slower, nevertheless will be relatively even. In short, there is a discrepancy between the child’s potential and actual achievement.

On the other hand, a child with a specific learning disability is one of average or above average intelligence who has very specific difficulties which can make learning very difficult. There may be a deficit in any of the basic central nervous system functions. These have to do with the use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning or mathematical abilities; in other words attention and memory spans, language acquisition, auditory and visual perception, motor coordination and planning, spatial orientation, impulse control and sequencing.

How do I identify a slow learner?

Since slow learners cannot be a grouped as a separate diagnostic category they are often overlooked and not considered as individuals who need intervention. Here are a few distinguishable traits of a slow learner:

• Scores consistently low on achievement tests
• A below average ability to comprehend academic concepts
• Functioning ability is significantly below that of grade level
• Prone to immature interpersonal relationships and prefers playing with younger children
• Tends to be ignored by peers and may not have common peer interests
• Faces difficulty in following multi-step directions
• Frequently has impaired fine motor coordination such as delayed ability to tie shoe laces
• Has few internal strategies (i.e. organisational skills, transferring/generalising information)
• Works well with “hands-on” material (i.e. labs, picturised texts, manipulative, activities)
• May have poor self-image and lacks self-confidence
• Works on all tasks slowly and mostly tries the same strategies; relies on trial and error learning and less on insightful learning
• Masters skills slowly and does not master some at all
Different Strokes Handling Slow Learners

Essential Steps, Parenting Tips, and Remedial Help

Recommendations for parents
Keep things in perspective by not being intimidated by the news that your child may have special needs. All people are wired differently and learn differently. Your most important job is to support your child and to help him keep his self-esteem intact. Don’t let the test scores, school bureaucracy and endless paperwork distract you from the goal of providing your child with emotional, educational and moral support.

Do your own research and become your own expert by learning about new developments in the field, different programmes and educational techniques that could make an impact with your child. You may instinctively look to others for solutions such as schools, teachers, therapists or doctors but you need to take charge when it comes to finding the tools your child needs to continue learning. In the case of slow learners there is no definitive learning environment. It’s all about finding the perfect fit.

Be an advocate for your child by speaking up time and time again to get special help for your child. Embrace your role as a proactive parent and work on your communication skills. It may be frustrating at times, but your calm, reasonable and firm voice may make the difference in achieving what you want for your child.

Remember that your influence on your child outweighs all others as he will follow your lead. If you approach the learning challenges with optimism, hard work and a sense of humour, your child is likely to embrace your perspective or at least see the challenges as a detour rather than a roadblock. Focus your energy on learning what works and implementing it in your child’s life in the best way. Positive energy ensures that the child does not mentally shut off from stress and academic difficulties.

Recommendations for teachers and tutoring parents
Repetition, repetition, repetition! You might feel like you are saying the same thing over and over, but it helps make a concept more concrete. A slow learner with limited reasoning skills will take longer to comprehend what may seem easy and almost natural to us. You can put up posters in his work space so whenever his concentration drifts, he is constantly reminded of the task at hand. Also encourage other activities in which the child can experience success. Repeat these from time to time so as to keep up a healthy level of confidence.

If your child has been diagnosed as a slow learner, do not despair. The child can gain a certain level of proficiency by constant practice and encouragement. Many slow learners can be trained to pass exams using the rote learning and practice method. They can grow up to handle jobs and relationships as they are dependable and trustworthy. There are several careers which require fixed schedule and routines in which they can shine. There are many things other children can learn from slow learners such as their persistence, patience and hard work.

Differentiated Instruction or one-on-one tutoring helps fill in gaps in basic skills and helps a student stay on track. Individual attention is extremely important as it eliminates many factors that hinder learning, such as distractions, annoying peers, a fast classroom pace, and a competitive atmosphere.

• Teach study skills to help him become more efficient at studying.
• Teach important concepts and leave out some of the less important details.
• Focus more on core subjects such as Math and English so the child’s fundamentals are well laid out and he can pursue any interest later.

Peer tutoring is one of the most effective strategies for slow learners. Parents and teachers should identify tolerant and caring peers and allow the slow learner to be taught alongside them or through them. The more a child interacts with those of his age, the more successful he will feel, eliminating the problem of self-confidence.

Apply the theory of Multiple Intelligences by allowing the child to dabble in a range of activities at a young age. For example, if the child shows an interest in sports, encourage his success in it. Success not only boosts confidence but excelling in a certain area, whatever it maybe, allows the child to feel socially accepted and ‘normal’. Additionally, sports can then also be used to teach various mathematical computations and calculations, for instance.

Add variety to the academic routine by making learning a fun process through the use of educational puzzles and games. It has been observed that the majority of slow learners enjoy activities which are hand held and allow them to play an active role. It allows the child to learn by using his tactile sense, one that leaves a more lasting impression in his memory. Also ensure lessons are short and frequent rather than long and strenuous.

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– Dr. Sulata Shenoy
Director, Turning Point Centre for Child Guidance
Different Strokes

Work on material that is somewhat challenging but allows success. Work that is overtly hard is a deterrent. Do not worry about the relation between the child’s age and the grade level that he is working at. The child needs to be in a comfort zone to ensure that the process of learning stays fun. For example, if the child enjoys reading a story, then start off each study lesson with a short and easy comprehension passage.

Communication is key. Encourage your child to talk to you and voice his thoughts. Ask what he did in school and what the best part of the day was. Ask questions to shed light on possible interests such as TV shows, sports and music. Ask the child what he wants and plans to do. Give short specific directions and have your child repeat them back to you. Many slow learners have a problem with following multi-step instructions. Makes sure the directions that you give allow the child to physically move around and talk to people. The academic world can be conquered much more easily once the child can communicate comfortably.

It is important for parents to emotionally move at the same pace as their child. Expectations should be brought down to a suitable level but also not completely curbed. With sufficient effort, constant reinforcement and, most importantly, patience, a slow learner’s performance can be augmented. Visit occupational therapists and child psychologists early on to eliminate the possibility of Intellectual Disability. Most of all maintain a positive attitude and a plentiful supply of support and constant effort.

Gayathri Batchu has a 13-year-old son who was identified as a slow learner when he was six. ParentEdge spoke to her to find out what her initial reaction was and to find out how she handled the situation.

What were some of the initial challenges you faced when you found out your child may fall under the ‘Slow Learner’ category?
Initially I found it difficult to embrace the situation. It took me a while to put aside the label and realise this only meant doubling our effort and support and staying on track. It is very easy to turn fatalistic and give up hope. When I look back now the most important step seems to be self-education about the problem.

In your experience how should you go about tackling the situation?
Attack the problem early on. Don’t live in the false hope that, miraculously, your child may eventually do well at school and all problems will be solved. Start consulting educational counsellors, occupational therapists, psychologists and special educators early on.

Most importantly, keep a good relationship with your child’s class teacher. Meet her regularly and monitor any small improvements so you can always know exactly where your child stands.

Make informed decisions. Since slow learners usually take longer than usual to adapt to new academic environments, don’t make any drastic changes without making sure it’s the best choice for your child. Even small decisions count, as over time their implication multiplies.

What are your views on school choices and conventional education?
It depends on the degree of the child’s impairment. Initially, try to see how well the child can adapt in a conventional school environment. Some schools may be willing to accommodate the child by ignoring low performances when they are shown proof of the child’s improvement. Some even have special resource rooms, remedial classes, and part time special educators. There is no one benchmark way to help slow learners in general. One thing for sure is to always supplement regular schooling with special help. What kind though depends on how acute the problem is and should only be decided after standard assessments are taken. In brief, go on a fact-finding mission about choices in your area before you pull the child out of a regular school.

What are some techniques and tips that you implement?
I always try to keep my child engaged and stop him from mentally wandering. I keep the stress and pressure off but at the same time keep him mentally engaged and stimulated. I make sure learning is as fun process as it can be. Turn ‘homework’ sessions into ‘activity’ sessions and keep the positivism flowing.

Whenever possible, I give my child an opportunity to talk to me or the rest of the family about what he is feeling and what he is doing. When he is emotionally comfortable, learning suddenly becomes a whole lot easier.

– Sagar Batchu