

PARENTS and EDUCATORS MUST CONSTANTLY BOOST LEARNING DISABLED KIDS' SELF ESTEEM by Henri Audet

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Parents like to think of their children as regular kids, often not recognizing if they have one or more learning disabilities, and in some cases even choosing to ignore the possibility. What many do not see is that attention deficit disorders and other learning disabilities impact a child's entire lifespan and every facet of the child's life.

In a recent groundbreaking study conducted by the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada the three-year research project PACFOLD "Putting a Canadian Face on Learning Disabilities," concluded "people with LD are often prevented from realizing success at school, at work, and in everyday activities." <http://www.pacfold.ca/>

The study cited three prominent examples of factors that effect achievements and accomplishments outside government support, including A) finding a teacher who is trained to work with a student with LD; B) having family support that includes financial resources; and C) finding the 'right' employer that understands learning disabilities and provides the necessary accommodations. I would like to add another factor to the list. One that is just as crucial as detection and treatment. Specifically, It is important to stress the necessity to constantly boost self-esteem in these kids.

Recently, I outlined this idea in a speech to school principals affiliated with *Ontario's Education Quality and Accountability*

Office (EQAO). After showing a slideshow of the youth at Camp Kirk, I asked a simple rhetorical question – "When you looked at their faces, did you once detect a disability?" The answer was an unequivocal no. These kids are not freaks; they are not weird or slow. They are fundamentally average and normal kids. That normalness, as ironic as it may seem, is part of the problem. Learning disabilities and attention deficit disorders are invisible disabilities. People rarely take notice of these kids' challenges and if they do, they often accept the familiar refrain that these kids are simply lazy, dumb, crazy or just do not give a damn.

This attitude often prevails until that one illuminative moment when a parent discovers their own child has one or more learning disabilities; all of a sudden, the light goes on and they begin to understand that their child is not lazy – this is real and something must be done.

Yet, in addition to any clinical environment or treatment regimen, kids with learning disabilities also need a nurturing, non-competitive and structured environment that allows them to develop social, emotional and physical skills – this is how you raise their confidence and self-worth. Once within this environment, these kids will have the courage to take risks and increase their opportunities for success and happiness throughout life.

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This self-esteem boost can be sparked by support from a teacher, parent, camp counsellor, employer or friend. If these people give children with learning disabilities an environment and the tools to develop social and physical skills, the kids will be able to take risks and increase their opportunities for success and happiness.

As one parent said to me after her son attended Camp Kirk, “the transformation came when Jonathan realized that being different does not mean being worse, that each person has something special to bring to the world and that trying is the first step along the road to succeeding.”

It is our responsibility to help children like this discover their full self-worth. No matter the degree of disability or difficulty children have, they must be given the opportunity to discover their strengths, to learn to accept their limitations and be given the opportunity to shine.

About the author

Henri Audet is Executive Director for Camp Kirk, a residential summer camp in Kirkfield, Ontario for children with learning disabilities and attention deficit disorders. Camp Kirk takes the focus away from children’s learning disabilities and puts it on them as children and their strengths.

<http://www.campkirk.com>