

Primitive reflexes and their impact on learning
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I know he isn't doing as well as he could, I just don't know why.

The importance of early identification of special needs in a child is something teachers and parents will generally agree on. However, some children still seem to reach a stage several years into their education when their failure to meet expected levels of attainment has not been addressed successfully, however hard everyone tries. Teachers know through assessment that there are children, **who** are not quite making the grade, they know that a child is failing, but not **why**.

The concept of neuro-developmental delay describes the way in which an omission or arrest of a stage of early development can cause difficulties with subsequent motor control, eye functioning, eye-hand co-ordination and perceptual skills.

Everyone is born with a set of primitive reflexes (sometimes known as survival reflexes) which should be inhibited or controlled by the developing nervous system during the first year of life. For example, when a newborn infant grasps an object placed in her hand, she does so automatically and without conscious thought. This is an example of a primitive reflex, which is an involuntary response to a specific stimulation. These primitive reflexes should be present at birth and they provide an indication of the status of the Central Nervous System. (This is why the majority of doctors test these primitive reflexes - to assess the neurological status of the infant).

As the baby grows and develops, these primitive reflexes are replaced by the postural reflexes which allow the brain to take more sophisticated control. As this is happening, for example, the child replaces automatic movements such as the grasping of objects placed in the palm with the developing ability to hold a pencil correctly.

Research, on-going over many years, shows that children who have difficulties at school often have not passed effectively through these stages of early development so that they can make the most of their intelligence and natural ability. This means that learning can be a frustrating and stressful experience.

It is recognized that many children do grow out of early problems and there are many individual variations within stages of development. However there also exists a group of children who, to all outward appearances are 'normal', but who are immature in other aspects of their development.

It is these children who may benefit from a movement-based intervention programme such as those detailed below. These have been used by teachers and parents successfully in many countries with significant improvements in balance, coordination and classroom performance.

References

Move to Learn: www.movetolearn.com.au

Barbara Pheloung has worked for many years with children in Australia primarily, and her programme has spread to many countries including Fiji, China, Africa and India. Her books and e-book Ten Gems for the Brain are very readable for parents and teachers. There is on-going research with The University of Sydney.

The Institute of Neuro-Physiological Psychology: www.inpp.org.uk

Sally Goddard-Blythe is the Director of INPP and the author of several definitive books on this subject. The INPP is also a training Institute.