

The Story of Little Lewis

Picture this scene: 10 year old Lewis has been enrolled in a running camp. The parents have seen how fit most of his peers are and felt that this running camp would help him build endurance and social relationships with healthy peers. Upon entering camp, it becomes painfully clear that Lewis has some work ahead of him to be considered a valued member of a team for competition. His parents made sure he had all the right equipment (clothing, shoes, and water bottle) to get started. After a day or two, Lewis's counselors are deeply concerned that he cannot keep up with the rigor of the camp's daily demands. They meet and decide that the best way for Lewis to be successful, to keep up with others, to feel confident, is to help him out. Lewis says to himself, "This is stupid. I'm stupid. I don't care anymore." Exhausted, frustrated, and feeling rather low and isolated, he gladly accepts their plan. The next day, whenever there was an activity that Lewis was not physically able to accomplish, a camp counselor picked him up and carried him to the finish line. Everyone cheered, seeing that, at last, he was "able" to make it to the goal. After a week of camp his parents picked him up and noticed that he had not built endurance, and that his social interactions seemed more like others were talking down to him, with comments like, "Lewis, it was great to see you finally made it across the finish line. Thank goodness for your counselor's assistance." They meant well, but it left Lewis and his parents feeling a bit "different" from the others.

What happened to Lewis at camp is a metaphor to what happens in classrooms all over the country. The teachers compensate and accommodate for Lewis's deficits. With their well-intentioned assistance, he has moments where he feels he can be like others. He can feel a sense of competency and confidence. However, it is short lived. His fitness deficits hinder him from fully reaching his goals. The only strategy he has learned is continual short term dependence on his teachers to get the job done. As he approaches puberty, he feels more and more isolated because he hasn't been equipped with strategies to learn, thus his learning curve begins a greater downward spiral as his self image, self confidence, and desire for learning are affected by negative thoughts. For many students like Lewis, because he cannot pay attention, or because he cannot remember what was taught in class, or because he has trouble reading, he finds ways to gain social acceptance by either putting others down (making fun of them, including disrespectful comments about his teacher) or by clowning around, distracting the whole class with his antics. He feels accepted socially, because some of his peers laugh with him, and because he feels a sense of control when he so bravely makes inappropriate comments.

Learning disabilities are neurologically based. The way a person intakes information, visually or auditorally, will effect their organization of that information and eventually their retrieval of that information. A person with learning disabilities, as summarized by government panels and Federal law, is described as a person with average to above average intelligence who has had adequate opportunity to learn, but still has significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. These difficulties are psychologically based disorders and may give rise to behavioral problems such as self-regulation (impulse control), and poor social perception and interactions.

Is there any hope? Yes! After more than 25 years of research and practice, the National Institute of Learning Development team of experts have developed, with God's guidance, a

program called Discovery Therapy. This therapy is to the brain as the physical fitness training would have been to Lewis. If Lewis had received proper coaching over a longer period of time to strengthen his muscles and cardio-vascular system, he could have run well with his teammates. No one would have had to pick him up for every race and carry him.

Discover Therapy, along with other techniques under NILD are driven by distinguishing characteristics. NILD Educational Therapy builds student confidence and competence through transformation learning. Instead of compensating for the lack of achievement, the therapist, through dynamic intervention, transforms the neurological connections in the areas of deficit, thereby strengthening cognition for life-long learning. How is this accomplished? The first distinctive is Interactive Language: a dialoging between the therapist and student which allows the student to think aloud and organize their language to clearly state what, how and why they are processing information. The second distinctive is Dynamic Intervention: without a scripted lesson manual, the therapist uses a variety of techniques, and, questions the student's responses to lead that student to wonder and reflect. It is dynamic, living, in that moment, with completely individualized – intensive – interactive attention with that student. The third distinctive is to develop Core Academic Skills and Higher Ordering Processing. This means that student focuses on HOW to learn rather than WHAT to learn. They learn how to process information accurately. Core academic skills, such as basic reading skills are addressed, such as phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. However, more than that, students develop higher order processing which allows them to think and reason abstractly, a necessary skill for achievement. Those first three distinctives are taught through the next four hallmarks of NILD Educational Therapy.

How are the distinctives acquired? First, through Explicit and Intentional Intervention the aforementioned skills are taught through carefully planned instruction. Students with learning disabilities often do not learn incidentally, rather they need clear, specific, intense intervention directed toward their individualized needs. Poor Lewis was not given systematic, explicit interventions that gave him life-long skills. Instead he was given a quick fix, which did not help him become an independent runner, or learner. Secondly, through Inductive Reasoning and Socratic Questioning, a student can look at a specific list of words, for example, and generalize a spelling rule. They have made a “discovery”, which enables them to own the learning and enhances long-term memory. As the student begins to think about solving a problem or making choices, the therapist probes their thoughts and encourages the student to elaborate their thinking and express it clearly with words. Thirdly, through Guided Practice and Systematic Feedback, students review previous learning and, with the guidance of the therapist, they build accuracy in their responses to new problems. As the student explores possible solutions, the therapist encourages verbal expression, so the student can come to clarify their own learning processes. Eventually, the student internalizes his reasoning as it becomes more automatic. This process builds extensive background knowledge and experience in learning strategies. Lastly, learning is gained through Self-regulation and Transfer. The NILD Educational Therapy techniques affect impulse control, a necessary skill for attending appropriately. Students with learning disabilities rarely connect pieces of learned facts and associate them to life. They often see events as separate episodes. As therapy progresses, cognitive changes are demonstrated in students functioning independently, building connections with prior knowledge and other skills, a willingness to question and respond to tasks, and attend to and apply work that is done in school to daily life skills.

Areas of vulnerability can be strengthened to support academic learning as the therapist meets with the student 2 times a week for 80 minute sessions over a 3 year period. As the therapist and parents become involved with the child, the foundations of a student's learning, which are: reasoning, basic skills, abstract thinking, visual and auditory processing, strategic thinking, and confidence, will be strengthened in order for the student to access and use information taught in school and in life. As they sure up these foundational skills, their confidence, motivation, and self-worth (the knowledge that you are valuable in God's eyes) are realized. This cognitive training gives us a new understanding of Proverbs 22:6 "Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it." The Lord has made our incredible brains with great capacity for learning and change. It is not a fixed entity, rather a malleable group of neurons and glial cells that are at-the-ready for sending and connecting messages. For some, this requires intense intervention, such as Discovery Therapy. It is merely a technique which works hand-in-hand with the material God has given, and enables the particulars of the brain to be alert and attend, to organize information and connect learning, to enjoy positive experiences. Perhaps, as the child is cognitively trained, they, and their parents, may understand more clearly the whole picture, the work God is doing in their lives. We have hope. We have a future. His promise is clear, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you **hope** and a **future**." Jeremiah 29:11.