Building a Brick House - cementing the foundations for learning

Max is a boy who has just started Grade 1. He is happy, excited, and eager. He loves going to school each day and he loves his teacher.

Near the end of the first term, Max’s teacher notices that he seems to be experiencing some difficulties in some areas of his development. He struggles to form letters and he is battling to understand the concept of word sounds. His sight word recognition is affecting his reading progress and seems to be more restless and fidgety than his peers.

Max is starting to become a little reluctant to persevere and he is not as excited for school. Max’s teacher calls a meeting with his parents where she voices her concerns.

Max’s mother leaves the meeting feeling overwhelmed and concerned. Max is her first child and she does not know what to expect. She asks her mother for advice and she says to “give it time”. She asks her friend who has 3 children and she says “he will catch up”. So she turns to Google and within 5 minutes, she has diagnosed Max with everything from low muscle tone and ADHD to processing difficulties. But, she does not want to label Max so she ignores her and the teacher’s concerns and hopes for the best.

Near the end of the year, Max’s teacher calls for another meeting and voices her concerns with his lack of progress. She feels he may need to repeat his Grade 1 year. Horrified at the trauma this may cause, Max’s mother insists he will catch up and that he must go to Grade 2.

In Grade 2, Max really struggles. He is de-motivated and some days he does not want to go to school. He often has headaches and stomach upsets.

Max’s mother begins to wish she had acted earlier and had listened to his Grade 1 teacher. She wonders if there is a way to help Max and wishes that she had a plan going forward.

Of course, Max’s story is fictional but so often we work with families who are in this exact situation. Parents often want to try a “wait-and-see” approach in the hope that their children will outgrow their difficulties.

Unfortunately, both experience and research have shown us otherwise.

Changing “wait-and-see” to “see-and-act”

The first few years of a child’s life are extremely important in their development and in laying the foundation for cognitive functioning, behavioural traits, social skills, self-regulation capacity, and physical health. Even though it may seem that younger children are simply “playing”, they are in fact developing all the underlying skills needed for formal learning. If there are difficulties
identified in this process, there are more likely to be difficulties when formal learning begins.

**The benefits of early intervention**

- **Improving long-term outcomes**

Goode, Diefendorf, and Colgan (2011) say that “high quality early intervention can change a child’s developmental trajectory and improve outcomes” (p. 1). Of course, it is never too late for intervention but the sooner difficulties are identified and the correct support put in place, the less likely there is to be the cumulative effect that happens with learning difficulties over time.

- **Entrenching foundation skills**

You cannot build a house without a strong foundation. Unless the underlying concepts for learning and understanding are set firmly, further learning cannot occur. As the child moves through the grades, they are so desperately trying to build their foundations that they miss out on other opportunities for development. The gap between performance and expectation increases and the chances of the child “catching-up” become smaller. Not only does the child’s learning suffer but so does their emotional and behavioural development. This can lead to increased anxiety, low self-esteem, emotional difficulties, and behavioural disorders. Children eventually lose their desire to learn and once this happens, learning almost never occurs.

- **Prevention is better than cure**

Early intervention means that bad habits can be changed before they become entrenched, emotional difficulties can be avoided, and the child can be equipped with skills that focus on their strengths to improve their performance and outcomes.

In a study conducted by Brakken (2017), “children who received early intervention had long-lasting benefits. After 5 years, children were successful in school—academically, socially, and emotionally—and experienced increased academic performance” (p. 1). The earlier one can intervene with specific difficulties, the better chance the child has of experiencing positive long-term outcomes.

- **Family benefits**

Families also benefit from early intervention strategies as they are better equipped to meet the needs of their child and according to Majnemer (1998) the parent-child relationship is strengthened by providing a supportive environment for the family as a whole.

A mother of a 6 year old boy wrote “Thank you very much. We have actually seen quite a big difference in behaviour, and are very excited to say that we are more than ready for this journey” C.R. Another father of a 7 year old girl wrote “We were initially reluctant to accept that ‘E’ had issues because we thought she was just naughty. Now we know how her brain
works. We know how to help her and we can understand her more” J.F.

**The first step to early intervention**

When your child has been identified as experiencing specific difficulties, it is important to first listen. Understand that teachers are not the enemy but that their concerns are real and justified. They are the experts who work with your child every day and they know what your child should be able to achieve.

The teacher is likely to have already implemented specific strategies to assist your child in the classroom but may now require further professional assistance.

The teacher may ask you to take your child for a psycho-educational assessment. This assessment will help to:

- Provide insight into the child’s underlying developmental skills needed in order to cope.
- Identify the child’s strengths and areas of difficulty.
- Determine if the child is reaching his or her full potential in the classroom and if not, why not?
- Provide a plan going forward.
- Give guidance in terms of the most helpful interventions and strategies for both home and school.
- Provide support for the child and his/her family to enable the child to reach his or her full potential.

You see, it is not about labelling and it cannot do any harm. An assessment provides understanding and clarity and allows parents to:

- Gain invaluable insight into their child.
- Make informed decisions regarding education as early as possible.
- Ensure the correct support is put in place.
- Support their child in becoming the best he or she can be.

The moment you change wait-and-see to see-and-act, you enable your child to benefit from early intervention: the opportunity to understand better, to learn more quickly, to cope more effectively—and with active support, awareness, and guidance—to ultimately master! What kind of house are you empowering your child to build today?

By: Lauren Freese
Educational Psychologist