

## **MOVING INTO LITERACY**

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**A brain growth spurt, between ages 5 1/2 and 7 1/2, usually leads to concrete thinking.** Sometime during this period of approximately 2 years there should be a 3 to 4 month “meltdown” allowing indigenous or pre-operational thinking patterns to give way to concrete thinking patterns for children in most cultures.

### **Who are likely to be early shifters?**

- girls
- highly verbal children
- children who have been read to a lot
- children who had a verbally enriched home and/or school life
- calm children who can engage in activities for long periods

### **Who are likely to be late shifters?**

- boys
- dreamy, artistic children
- children who weren't exposed to or attracted to books
- English as a second language children (if their first language lacks social status and respect)
- children who did not have a verbally enriched home or school life
- highly stressed or traumatized children, whose hyper vigilance makes it hard to concentrate

### **Will this shift always occur?**

No. In non-literate cultures, because indigenous thinking patterns serve the culture so well, this cognitive shift frequently does not occur unless a cultural shift occurs. Collectivization, industrialization, micro finance and other influences that favor concrete thinking can shift a whole culture very quickly into using concrete thinking strategies.

Children who experience high stress and trauma, especially near or during this transitional time, are also likely to remain pre-operational (or indigenous) thinkers and to find concrete, sequential tasks, reading, planning and focussing on the future very difficult.

### **How does this shift affect learning to read?**

Before this shift, a child must approach reading in one of two ways:

- 1) as a visual memory task, building up sight words and “word calling” in order to read or
- 2) by ear, remembering the story as if it were lines in a play, then performing it, page by page.

To understand phonics, which is a kind of code, the child must think concretely. It involves reversible thinking where letters and sounds are interchangeable. For example, the letter P can be decoded into the sound “puh” and the sound “puh” can be put into code by using the letter P. Handling codes is a more complex task than the memorization strategies of the pre-shift thinker. Educators within the Waldorf school movement even suggest that learning to read in this phonics based way requires a step forward in ego maturation, feeling more individuated, which can free the conscious mind to interpret the written word. They would view the dreamy child as not yet ready to enter this mode of thinking. They would introduce stories, activities and movement games that helped to ground the child and would resist pressuring such a child to master phonics until they see signs that the child is becoming more grounded in practicality.

### **How can we tell whether a delay in learning to read is a reason for concern or simply a case of a slow, but normal, maturational timetable?**

We can do a series of informal screenings. The first is to rule out trauma patterns. If the child exhibits the resilient characteristics below, the reading delay is not likely to be trauma related. On the other hand, if the child seems to be exhibiting a pattern of trauma responses, it is

important to create a safer, relaxed learning environment, with less competition and pressure, and more social engagement and playfulness so the child will be able to succeed in the classroom.

### **What is resiliency?**

- ability to respond freshly to each situation
- ability to return to a restful, alert state between events
- ability to enjoy novelty and generate interest in emotionally neutral info.
- ability to engage socially and enjoy friendships, play and humor
- ability to "bracket" negative events; (in time: it's only happening now) (in space: it only affects this aspect of my life, not everything)
- ability to accept positive feedback about one's performance

### **What is a Trauma Response?**

- reacting habitually; repetition, reenactment of archaic patterns of response
- maintaining low grade vigilance between events, rising to high vigilance for all events
- startling at novelty and only attending to emotionally charged, highly relevant info.
- social isolation, fixed routines, avoid play, unable to generate or respond to humor
- spreading effect with negative events; (in time: it's always going to be like this) (in space: it affects my whole life and contaminates everything)
- rejects "strokes" and consistently sees success as failure, an accident or not good enough

### **What if the child seems resilient, is past age 7, and still doesn't understand phonics?**

In that case, it is important to distinguish dreaminess from three possible remedial problems:

1) poor sensory integration. Children increase their grace, movement skills, and ability to coordinate the senses and link them with motor activities at different rates. However, if a child stands out as significantly behind their peers in eye-hand coordination, gross muscle skills, or language processing and auditory-motor connections, early intervention involving sensory integration work can spare the child years of social and cognitive struggles.

2) serious dyslexic tendencies. Mild spatial orientation confusions, periodic letter reversals and low curiosity about reading may all resolve themselves by age 9 without special attention. However, serious directional confusions, and persistent inability to understand letter symbols even though motivated, calls for early and skillful dyslexia remediation strategies.

3) hereditary patterns. Often, the telling clue distinguishing a child who needs early remedial support from the dreamy one who just needs a bit more time without pressure is the child's family history. Are there older siblings, parents, cousins, aunts or uncles who also struggled with coming into reading? If so, study their biographies carefully – what ages held the problems, did they work through the difficulties and if so, what helped? But if there are no traces of difficulty and lots of creative “outside the box” thinkers, artists and dynamically active folks among the child's relatives, chances are you are looking at another one in the child!

**What does the dreamy, slow to mature child look like?** [If a child passes the three screenings above and has several of these traits, you might try a ‘wait and see’ approach until about age 9.]

- very imaginative, artistic, musical or inventive
- hasn't seemed to ‘discover’ reading, and doesn't mind that reading hasn't ‘clicked’ yet<sup>a</sup>
- <sup>a</sup> can stay absorbed for long periods in what interests them
- less aware of fashions and personal appearance than peers
- rarely breaks things, spills things or bumps into things
- may be very tenderhearted and sensitive to your tone of voice
- has advanced spatial skills [talented at 3D art/sculpture; drawings show complex perspectives]
- usually relaxed while seated or engaged in activities  
[shoulders are dropped, hands are relaxed if not engaged, facial muscles are relaxed]

**Moving into literacy** is done in many ways, with many different timetables. If a teacher is to honor each child within today's complex classrooms, then small groups, special services, teacher aides and one-on-one time are essential. Don't hesitate to push for these vital resources.