

## **HELPING CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES**

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Today, one in 10 Canadians have learning disabilities, and in 1992 the Economic Council of Canada reported that more than 28 percent of 16 to 24 year olds born in Canada were functionally illiterate. While struggling public schools try to deal with the mounting number of children who experience anything from dyslexia to attention deficit disorder, and more kids are put on drugs such as Ritalin, concerned parents and educators are turning to other options for a solution.

No doubt about it, children with learning disabilities have a rough time in school. As well as the emotional devastation the disability causes, the long-term implications are even more unsettling. Children are less likely to finish high school, get good jobs, or develop their self-esteem.

Barbara Arrowsmith Young knows how difficult it is for these children. Walk into her office on the top floor of her school in mid-town Toronto, and you'll find a piece of Asian art hanging on the wall. The piece is long, slender and displays one word spelled out in Chinese characters, COURAGE.

"I learn a lot from my students," Arrowsmith Young says, "It takes a lot of courage to do what they do here every day."

What her students do is attempt to beat their learning disabilities so they can function again in the traditional school system.

A private institution, Arrowsmith School helps both elementary and secondary school-aged children break free of the incredibly frustrating mental ropes that bind them. The school's philosophy and methods are unlike those found in special education classes across the country. Instead of teaching children ways to compensate for their specific area of challenge (ie someone who can't write is often taught keyboarding skills, or a child who is unable to remember lectures uses a tape recorder and listens again later), the Arrowsmith program meets these challenges head on.

"I don't like to use the words "correct" or "fix," Arrowsmith Young says, "I don't even know what those words mean. But if you can identify the nature of the deficit in the weak area, you can develop an exercise that will stimulate and build the capacity in this area."

In other words, the school offers students a program of repetitive exercises to strengthen weak brain areas. The theory is based on the works of two researchers, Dr. Alexander Luria, a Russian psychoanalyst and neuro-psychologist, and Dr. Mark Rosenzweig, one of the first scientists to demonstrate neuroplasticity.

The former found that whenever a person carries out complex brain functions, such as reading, writing, or solving mathematical questions, individual but connected brain areas join to contribute to the activity. Damage or inherent weakness causes difficulties (ie a learning disability). Dr. Rosenzweig's research shows that the brain is an elastic and flexible organ - and that it can be strengthened.

While most people have one or two weak parts of the brain, they can compensate with other stronger areas. Children who come to the Arrowsmith School, however, have five or more weaknesses, thus fewer strengths to draw on, unless those areas are strengthened.

Most children with learning difficulties have different type of learning dysfunctions, so children who come to the program are tested for about a week in 19 key brain areas. A unique "exercise program" is developed specifically for them. The programs are tailored to get kids to perform at above-average levels on the brain exercises and standardized tests before returning them to school.

Since 1980 when the Arrowsmith School opened, it has turned out hundreds of children who move back into the world, reading, writing, and experiencing something that has evaded them for as long as they can remember - self confidence. In a follow-up study, 80% of these children met their academic goals.

From The Heart

Arrowsmith Young knows all about courage. She herself was diagnosed in Grade 1 with severe dyslexia. She couldn't make out letters, learned to read from right to left, and spent years learning how to cope with the challenges she faced.

Her disability was similar to someone who has experienced a stroke, and despite the hardships, Arrowsmith Young eventually made her way to graduate school where she came across Dr. Luria and Dr. Rosenzweig's work. It was at that time she began developing specific exercises for areas of the brain that under-perform in people with learning disabilities.

The school was built on years of compassion, understanding, and hard work. As well as housing high-tech labs and exercise programs, the school is also filled with a tremendous amount of warmth and encouragement for the children.

One former Arrowsmith graduate who came to the school at Grade 13 went on to graduate university and is now a systems analyst for IBM. He told her that the year he was at her school was the hardest of his life. Every day he had to face his shortcomings and hope her methods would work.

Another former student's math and reading skills were at a Grade 3 level at the age of thirteen, and he was told after neuro-psychological testing at a University that he would never read beyond Grade 3 or graduate from high school. After three years at the Arrowsmith School, he was at a Grade 10 level in reading and math, went directly into high school, graduated from college, and now works in venture capital and foreign trade.

Another student came to Arrowsmith School at the age of 16 reading at a Grade 1 level. His handwriting was indecipherable and his speech was laboured - he couldn't even read washroom signs to tell which one to use. After 14 months at Arrowsmith, he was reading at a Grade 7 level and his phonics level was at Grade 13.

Arrowsmith is all about changing how students feel about themselves. While tuition isn't cheap - a full-time program is \$16,000 annually - it is important that parents look into all options. In some cases a less costly alternative might be the ticket.

The Arrowsmith techniques are taught in some Ontario Catholic schools (at present there is a waiting list), but Arrowsmith Young recommends contacting the Learning Disabilities of Canada Association for a list of programs that are right for your children and family situation. Some are inexpensive or even free.

The important thing is to advocate for your child - and refuse to give up until you have a solution. "A parent needs to take this on as a project, because they're the ones who know the child best," says Arrowsmith Young. "A lot of times schools will say there isn't anything wrong, but parents know."

Arrowsmith School offers several program locations in Ontario as well as program locations in Vancouver.