

WHY IS DR. SUSSMAN SENDING ME THIS LETTER?

Dr. Sussman sends this letter to a parent whenever he receives input from the parent or school that a child has some or all of the following:

- 1) is obsessed with the computer
- 2) resists class work and homework
- 3) has trouble understanding instructions
- 4) has trouble reading and comprehending verbal or written material
- 5) gets discouraged quickly, feeling they cannot do the school work assigned
- 6) dislikes school and/or gets overly emotional wrought about school
- 7) does a lot of negative self-talk, "I'm dumb...I hate my life."
- 8) "shuts down" academically**

WHAT IS A SHUTDOWN LEARNER?

One of the most common complaints I hear about the children I work with is that the child shuts down when asked to do classwork and homework especially reading, and writing. Invariably, it is because the child is a non-language-based learner (meaning visual-spatial and hands on learner) and no one has recognized this and explained it to the parent or the child. A non-language based learner is better at hands on tasks. They learn from doing. They are often obsessed with video games, love Legos, mechanical tasks, assembling things, and disassembling things and putting them back together. Our school curriculums, starting in first grade, are almost totally language-based. This is a huge disadvantage to non-language based learners who have difficulty with reading and comprehending language-based materials as well as manipulating words, composing stories and writing essays.

WHAT IS A SPATIAL OR VISUAL LEARNER? HOW ARE THEY DIFFERENT FROM LANGUAGE-BASED LEARNERS?

The non-language based learner is much better at spatial or visual tasks, like playing computer games, building an elaborate Lego structure or perhaps assembling an airplane model. As adults, they can assemble furniture without reading the vague directions, often translated poorly from a foreign language. They can fix plumbing, build decks, and do projects like renovating a kitchen or putting an addition on the house. They can design houses, buildings, and elaborate computer programs. They have "vision" to see things many of us cannot such as a new invention or future trend. Unfortunately, we as a society overly value language based professions and skills like being an author, CEO, attorney, physician, etc. that require reading, comprehending, and writing copious amounts of complex language-based materials.

HOW DOES OUR TYPICAL SCHOOL CURRICULUM AFFECT SPATIAL-VISUAL LEARNERS?

The language-based learner thrives in our schools. They feel comfortable in school and experience successes on a daily basis. Success breeds success and they develop confidence that they are smart and that they "get it." Many of the children who come to me are non-language based learners (spatial or

visual learners). They experience failure in school on a daily basis. They lose confidence and “shut down” because they are continually being asked to do things that do not come naturally. They do not “get” what the language-based learners do which makes them feel inferior. Parents and teachers tell them they are “not trying hard enough,” and that “they could do better (euphemisms for “lazy”). They often start calling themselves “dumb....stupid...a loser” by second or third grade. In other words they feel helpless and hopeless. Self-esteem crumbles.

HOW DO PARENTS TYPICALLY TREAT SHUTDOWN LEARNERS?

Very often, parents differ on how to handle the shutdown learner. One parent often tries to help the child with homework even to the point of doing it. The other parent believes that this is the problem and that the child needs to do homework more independently and be criticized and/or punished for shutdown behavior. Eventually, out of frustration the latter parent gives up on the child which only redoubles the former parent’s efforts to be over involved with the child. The irony is that often the more critical parent may also be a non-language based learner themselves which is why they are not comfortable assisting the child with the heavily weighted language-based assignments. In any event that parent should never give up on the child. Even better, that parent should do activities that appeal to the shutdown learner e.g., hands on learning activities like camping, hiking, mechanical hobbies, sports etc. This gives the shutdown learner much needed approval, fun, and parental acceptance to counter all the negativity in their life.

WHAT IS THE BEST OVERALL APPROACH FOR A PARENT OR TEACHER TO TAKE WITH A SHUTDOWN LEARNER?

The best thing a parent or teacher can do is understand that the non-language based learner is “up against it.” Rather than admonishing, lecturing, punishing, and rejecting such a child, one should be the child’s ally, advocate, booster, cheerleader, coach, and team mate. Acknowledge, praise, recognize, and support the child’s efforts and small successes. A high five, a hug, a pat on the back, an “Atta Boy (or Girl)” serves to communicate acceptance and approval to counter their self-loathing. It also motivates the child to stick with it even though school is an arduous, tedious place for them. If possible, lobby the school to offer more “hands on learning by doing” instruction. One example would be to teach Botany by having a greenhouse, History by having a museum of historical artifacts and photographs, Geometry by having a Lego set or other type building set. An excellent book is titled appropriately enough, “The Shutdown Learner” by Richard Selznick, PhD. It is available on Amazon for under \$20.

WHAT ARE SOME ALTERNATIVES FOR THESE CHILDREN?

Tutoring from specialized tutors who use visually based methods (such as the Orton-Gillingham approach) to teach reading and writing is helpful. Unfortunately, there are not many such tutors around. Ms. Ellen Callahan is in Somerset. She sees clients in her home and her telephone is (732) 718-5833. If Ms. Callahan is too far from you, she will refer you to an Orton-Gillingham tutor in your area. The only Orton-Gillingham tutor in Staten Island (that I know of) is Ms. Nicole Profeta Tel. (718) 208 0235. She sees clients in her home which is close to my office. A private specialized school that caters to children who learn differently may be warranted but they are extremely costly. In some cases, the

school system may agree to help fund it. Sometimes, it may require hiring an attorney who specializes in this area to get the school system to fund attendance at a specialized private school. Many school systems offer free alternative schools for such children. Parents worry such schools limit their children's prospects to lower level employment. However, many offer computer and technology driven courses that have high applicability and demand in the business world. Besides, if the school offers instruction appealing to the child, it greatly increases the child's affinity for learning and studying. Self-esteem will rise and hope will replace pessimism.

WHY SHOULD SPATIAL-VISUAL LEARNERS AND THEIR PARENTS BE HOPEFUL AND OPTIMISTIC?

If much of the above applies to your child, it is best to realize it as soon as possible. As one parent told me after reading this, "knowledge is power!" Everyone in the family will benefit if you can accept your child for who they are. This will help your child to accept themselves, be proud of their unique gifts and talents, and find a calling that will fulfill them. I hope this letter is helpful. It is not meant to lower your expectations and hopes for your child. Many creative and famous people have done poorly in our language-based schools and been great successes in life. As you may know, many successful entrepreneurs dropped out of school because they found it stifling to their learning. If you wish to discuss any of this with me, please do not hesitate to contact me. In fact, I would want very much to know your thoughts about this letter including if you think it applies to your child.

Good Luck! Dr. Steve

P.S. Remember having a critical attitude will only further demoralize your child and make them want to give up altogether. Anger and punishments will only work short term. Worse, it will make him or her feel bad about themselves, not bad about their behavior. Perhaps even worse, the child resent you for being insensitive to what they are experiencing and view you as an "enemy." That will lead to increased acting out and shutting down and it will not turn them into language-based learners. Another fallout of parental disdain is that the child will be jealous and resentful of their siblings who are constantly receiving generous amounts of parental approval. Sibling rivalry will intensify to the detriment of the entire family.