

When a student struggles in school, often just getting some extra help is not enough.

This issue of INSIGHTS explains the specific underlying skills that, when underdeveloped, can lead to academic struggle.

When a student struggles, there can be many reasons. Some students have just missed some information along the way. Others simply take a little longer to “get it.” And sometimes some information is just difficult. But none of those characteristics should be on-going. Getting “a little behind” should be a very temporary condition. It shouldn’t last months or years. If it does, it normally means that something else is going on.

One of the things that really frustrates parents is when they can see that their child is bright, but certain “roadblocks” keep making school difficult. Things like:

- Taking 3 hours to do 45 minutes worth of homework
- Need someone sitting right there with them in order to get their work done
- Can’t keep their attention on their work for more than a few minutes
- Don’t get it, in spite of lots of help and repetition
- Appear lazy or unmotivated
- Don’t recognize words from one line to the next”
- Can’t seem to get the “big picture” in a story or textbook
- Seem disorganized
- Can’t follow directions

When time and attention don’t solve these roadblocks, what can parents do? Frequently they hire a tutor...someone to provide academic help for their student. When that doesn’t work, they start “tearing their hair out!”

Often, the characteristics listed above (and others) can indicate simply underlying thinking and “executive function” skills that are weak or have not completely developed. These are the skills that allow “academics” to make sense. They make it possible for a student to process all of that information that is covered in school, in their reading, and even in their life experiences.

What are these underlying skills?

Here is a list of the technical names for some of these skills:

Auditory Processing: to process sounds. The major underlying skill needed to learn to read and spell.

Auditory Discrimination: to hear differences in sounds such as loudness, pitch, duration, and phoneme.

Auditory Segmenting: to break apart words into their separate sounds.

Auditory Blending: to blend individual sounds to form words.

Auditory Analysis: to determine the number, sequence, and which sounds are within a word.

Auditory- Visual Association: to be able to link a sound with an image.

Comprehension: to understand words and concepts.

Divided Attention: to attend to and handle two or more tasks at one time. Such as: taking notes while listening, carrying totals while adding the next column. Required for handling tasks quickly as well as handling complex tasks.

Logic and Reasoning: to reason, plan, and think.

Long Term Memory: to retrieve past information

Math Computations: to do math calculations such as adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing.

Processing Speed: the speed which the brain processes information.

Saccadic Fixation: to move the eyes accurately and quickly from one point to another.

Selective Attention: to stay on task even when distraction is present.

Sensory-Motor Integration: to have the sensory skills work well with the motor skills -such as eye-hand coordination.

Sequential Processing: to process chunks of information that are received one after another

Simultaneous Processing: to process chunks of information that are received all at once

Sustained Attention: to be able to stay on task.

Visual Discrimination: to see differences in size, color, shape, distance, and orientation of objects.

Visual Processing: to process and make use of visual images.

Visual Manipulation: to flip, rotate, move, change color, etc. objects and images in one's mind

Visualization: to create mental images or pictures.

Visual Span: to see more/wider in a single look.

Working Memory: Holding information in your memory while deciding what to do with it.

While these skills develop naturally in some students, others have a number of areas that need "exercising."

So how can someone strengthen these skills?

Through the years there has been research in each of these skill areas. Programs have been developed and implemented. Over the last few years a program has become increasingly in demand because it takes research from each of those processing areas and combines exercises into a single unified program. The program is called PACE and stands for Processing and Cognitive Enhancement. The focus is not on academic subjects, but rather on building those skills that hold some students back from the kind of academic success they are capable of.

The best part of this kind of approach is
that the goal is for students to become
INDEPENDENT!

The PACE program is implemented with an educational professional and involves three high-energy one-hour sessions each week, with the student practicing at home for an additional three sessions. There are no drugs or complex machinery involved. The PACE program is usually completed by students in 36 sessions (plus 36 practice sessions at home).

“Is PACE the best program available?”

There are any number of specific programs that help struggling students. The advantage to PACE is that it strengthens such a broad range of skills, makes very significant gains, and takes less time than many other programs on the market.

And students report that PACE is more fun than many other programs.

When those underlying skills are brought “up to speed” and start supporting a student’s academic work, the need for extra help diminishes or disappears.

“Why haven’t I heard about PACE at school?”

There are a few schools that do use PACE, but with budget limitations and the one-on-one aspect of the program, most schools look for less intensive solutions. And schools have so many very severe disabilities they have to deal with that they run out of time and resources to deal with all students who could possibly benefit.

“Will PACE ‘fix’ all learning problems and my student get A’s?”

What PACE can do is strengthen those underlying processing skills. After any “program,” the next step is always to transfer/transition those skills into academic work.

How do I know if PACE (or any program) is right for my student?

At Fredericksburg Learning Enhancement Center, an evaluation is done to determine a child’s areas of strengths of weaknesses. This evaluation also helps to verify which program(s) would be best to meet the child’s needs.