



## **Smart but Struggling Students: 3 Steps to Set Every Child on the Path to Success**

**By Carla Andrews, PsyD**

As a Child & Adolescent Psychologist, I often hear kids and teens grumble about school, despite a true love of learning. More often than that, I hear parents say they've tried everything but don't know how to help with school issues. Even the brightest kids can dislike school or start to drown under academic pressure. These three steps can help any parent (or educator) set their child on the right path.

### **Step # 1: Know your child's type of intelligence.**

Historically, intelligence has been defined with one score. A *Full Scale Intelligence Quotient* (FSIQ) was—and still is—a powerful number, with 100 being average, higher scores indicating giftedness, and lower scores revealing intellectual disability.

In 1983, Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner revolutionized this thinking when he proposed eight different intelligences.<sup>i</sup> It's now widely accepted that every person possesses a unique "intellectual toolkit" with varying abilities:

1. Interpersonal (*people smart*)
2. Intrapersonal (*self smart*)
3. Logical-Mathematical (*number smart*)
4. Linguistic-Verbal (*word smart*)
5. Spatial (*picture smart*)
6. Musical (*music smart*)
7. Bodily-Kinesthetic (*body smart*)
8. Naturalist (*nature smart*)

In today's testing, psychologists and educators now pay far more attention to the *Index Scores* that make up the FSIQ. For example, the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition measures five intellectual abilities that combine to yield a FSIQ:

1. Verbal Comprehension Index (*word knowledge and reasoning*)
2. Visual Spatial Index (*visual details and relationships*)
3. Fluid Reasoning Index (*problem-solving logic*)
4. Working Memory Index (*attention, short-term memory*)
5. Processing Speed Index (*speed and accuracy*)

In the spirit of Gardner's Multiple Intelligences (MI) theory, knowing a child's Index Scores tells us a lot about how they can succeed in the classroom—and in life. Visit [www.literacynet.org/mi](http://www.literacynet.org/mi) for an assessment called "How Are you Smart?"<sup>ii</sup>

## **Step # 2: Know your child's learning style.**

MI theory inspired a re-evaluation of our schools. Educators started focusing on how to teach to every student's unique *learning style*. However, multiple intelligences and learning styles, while related, are two distinct matters. MI refers to your natural potential to process certain types of information. Learning style is *how* you learn that information; your preferred strategy of learning. Based on decades of research, Rita and Kenneth Dunn have named five general categories that impact learning<sup>iii</sup>:

1. Environmental (e.g., preferring absolute quiet when studying vs. music)
2. Emotional (e.g., self-motivated vs. requiring outside help to get started)
3. Sociological (e.g., preferring to study alone, in a pair, or in a group)
4. Physiological (e.g., learning by sight, sound, touch, or even whole body activity)
5. Psychological (e.g., focusing on the whole vs. parts)

Equally important, then, to knowing a child's intellectual potential is knowing *how* they can reach that potential. Visit [www.educationplanner.org](http://www.educationplanner.org) for an assessment called "What's Your Learning Style?"<sup>iv</sup>

## **Step # 3: Use this knowledge to unlock your child's potential.**

Once you are familiar with what type(s) of intelligence a child has and how s/he acquires information, you have good insight into that child's *cognitive profile*. Simply put, this is one's pattern of strengths and weaknesses. It is exceptionally unique and powerful knowledge to hold.

Children who can build confidence in their strengths and become more mindful of their weaknesses are on the path to fulfilling their true potential. At the same time, it is the parents' and teachers' job to support these efforts, just as in other aspects of raising our kids to be healthy, happy and successful adults.

Consider this scenario:

High school has been getting progressively harder for 16-year-old James. His parents are concerned that he is failing 2 classes, English and History. They remind him that junior year grades can affect college admissions, and he begins to doubt he's "college material." James' school counselor assesses the situation and finds that he has much stronger logical-mathematical abilities (*number smart*) than verbal-linguistic abilities (*word smart*.) This makes sense to James, who has always found math much easier than reading and writing. In talking with his counselor, James realizes that high school has been especially hard since he is expected to learn from oral class lectures (*linguistic*), take good written notes (*linguistic*), and study independently. His parents join the conversation to help reflect on James' learning style over the years. His mom has tried to teach him to study quietly in his room, mostly by re-reading chapters and taking detailed notes (*linguistic*), which worked well for her. As it turns out, James' preferred learning strategies are group study, where lots of noise and stimulation fuel his focus, and visual aids such as drawing diagrams to make sense of complex topics. With his teachers' support, James tries out some new approaches, such as

joining an English study group and recording History lectures so that he can listen again at a later time and draw timelines to keep track of the information. Moreover, James starts to feel excited about applying to college, even considering a major in accounting, now that he knows how to maximize his strengths.

### **A Final Word**

If challenges are serious enough to impair your child's academic performance, parents can request the school to complete a "psychoeducational evaluation" (that is, psychological testing of IQ plus academic areas like reading, writing and math) free of charge and within 90 days. Upon receiving the results, parents are not required to begin any services— I know many parents are hesitant to accept the idea of *special education*— but knowledge is power, and this first step can shed light on how to proceed. This evaluation may reveal a "specific learning disability," such as in reading, writing, or math, for which academic interventions are crucial for success. It may also shed light on other factors at play, such as ADHD or anxiety. In these cases, outpatient testing and/or therapy is likely the best path to help families receive a thorough assessment and develop a plan of action for reaching full potential at home, at school, and in life.

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<sup>i</sup> Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of mind: the theory of multiple intelligences*. New York, Basic Books.

<sup>ii</sup> *Assessment: Find Your Strengths*. (2019, Feb 26). Retrieved from <https://www.literacynet.org/mi/assessment/findyourstrengths.html>

<sup>iii</sup> Dunn, R., & Dunn, K. (1992). *Teaching elementary students through their individual learning styles*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

<sup>iv</sup> *What's Your Learning Style?* (2019, Feb 26). Retrieved from <http://www.educationplanner.org/students/self-assessments/learning-styles.shtml>