



Why Is My Child Struggling in School?



A Guide for Parents and Guardians of Struggling Learners

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1. Introduction

Watching a child struggle in school can be one of the most frustrating and upsetting situations for a concerned parent or guardian. As report card grades drop, the first course of action for many parents is to enroll the child in some form of academic tutoring. Most schools have response to intervention (RTI) plans in place to help students work on content level skills in subjects such as math or reading when students are falling behind. These usually take the form of extra time in a smaller class setting working on skills in those areas.

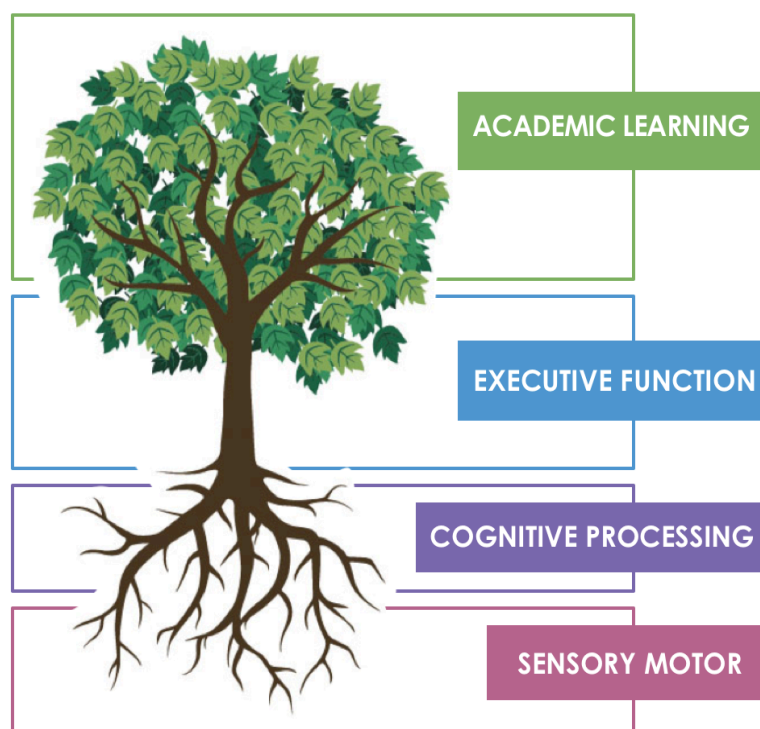
But **what if the problem lies much deeper than an understanding of the class material?** What if, regardless of extra instruction and practice in specific subjects, the student continues to struggle?

2. The Learning Tree

Often times, providing extra instruction and practice in specific subjects serves as a band-aid solution rather than addressing the root cause of the problem. For many students, the **root cause of their academic challenges lies in foundational skills**, such as executive functioning, processing skills, and sensory motor skills challenges.

It can be helpful to think about the learning process as a tree. At the top of the tree we find the level of proficiency in core subjects, such as science, math, language arts, and history. Since this is the part of the tree we can see, it makes sense that this is where most of the focus on intervention lies. For a tree to be healthy and robust, however, it must have a strong trunk and root system feeding it. The roots of our learning tree are the foundational skills that help students succeed in specific subjects. **Without these foundational skills, students will struggle regardless of how much intervention is given in specific subjects.**

The main foundational skills needed for student success include executive functioning skills, processing skills, and sensory motor skills. **If your child is struggling in school, he or she might need help in developing some of these foundational skills.**



3. Executive Functioning

Does your child struggle with organization or time management? Does he or she have trouble starting assignments or remembering key information? If so, your child may have under-developed executive functioning skills.

Executive functioning (EF) skills describe the **ability to develop a goal and plan** (accounting for space, time, and people) to direct present action.



Under this umbrella, there are many specific skills that combine to form a person's executive functions. However, in a broad sense, EF can be thought of as the brain's CEO. A CEO must take past and present experiences into account to make decisions and perform goal-directed actions for the company. This is what executive functioning skills do within the brain. If students lack the development of these EF skills, they will struggle with organization, time management, decision making, initiation, and emotional control, which will negatively impact their performance in school.

EF is one of many processes involved in the top-down regulation of what the brain does, and can affect everything from thought and emotion to motivation and action. All of these skills are essential for success in school. **In fact, executive functioning skills have been found to be one of the greatest determinants of success later in life.**

4. Cognitive Processing Skills

Does your child have trouble completing tests in the time allotted or completing homework on time? Does he or she find it difficult to take notes while reading or listening? Can completing complex problems or keeping up with conversations be a struggle? If so, your child might have under-developed processing skills.

Cognitive processing skills determine how quickly a student can take in information, process it, and form a response. These tasks are sub-academic, meaning it is not about what someone knows but how the brain processes the information and how fast it can formulate a response. Our brains process many different categories of information, such as auditory, visual, language, and spatial.

A student might struggle with processing skills in a variety of areas, such as visual or auditory processing. For example, a student who has auditory processing challenges might be able to hear correctly; however, their ability to segment and understand speech might be below age level. **A child with this challenge will always be “playing catch up”** with the information that he or she is hearing.

5. Sensory Motor Skills

Our brain receives information from our senses. This is how we process information from the world around us. Contrary to what we may have been taught, there are actually two additional senses added to the well-known sight, touch, hearing, taste, and smell; we also have the internal senses of body awareness (proprioception) and movement (vestibular). Our brains receive information from these senses and coordinates it all, enabling us to produce a response.



For a variety of reasons, these systems develop less well in some of us than in others, which simply means that some students must work harder to support these underlying systems. **If a child is experiencing challenges with these underlying skills, he or she can be in a perpetual “fight or flight” state, also known as a stress response.** Maintaining this degree of constant stress leaves little room for learning (Arky, n.d.). It **can also make regulating emotions and impulses much more difficult.**

6. Understanding the Learning Tree to Create Meaningful Interventions

While academic success is often measured by a student’s performance in key subjects such as math, science, writing, reading, and history, this is not necessarily where interventions should be taking place. Difficulty in one or more subject areas is a sign that a student is struggling; however, **just adding more content practice will not necessarily yield results.** This is focusing on the “top of the tree” only.

Instead, students who are struggling in school and have challenges with fundamental skills need specific interventions that get to the heart of the problem. Those students **need support at the levels below the knowledge of content or mastery of subject-specific skills.** It is likely that students will continue to be assessed and evaluated on “tree-top” level. Most learning challenges, however, are not taking place at this level, and, therefore, are not being addressed by remedial programs designed only to improve knowledge in subject areas (Brozo, 2009). Students who are consistently struggling in school need support from the “roots” up.

Learning difficulties are not a problem of intelligence or motivation. Instead, students with learning challenges process and receive information differently, sometimes making it more difficult for them to succeed in a classroom. Learning difficulties arise from underdeveloped skills including executive functioning skills (such as time management, organization, task initiation, and task completion) or gaps in processing or sensory motor skills that are required for sustained attention, focus, and information acquisition.

Rather than typical remedial approaches that address only the “top of the tree,” students who experience learning challenges will find it enormously beneficial to focus on key foundational skills at the roots of the learning tree. These key skills and systems include the following:

- Executive function
- Selective attention
- Working memory
- Logic and reasoning
- Processing speed
- Visual processing
- Auditory processing



7. Getting More Information

Trying to help a child who is struggling in school can seem like an endless, frustrating process. It is difficult to know where to start and what to do to help your child be the best student they can be. When developing a plan for your child, it is important to take into account the entire tree. Success is often measured by test scores and report card grades in core subject areas, but those are just the branches of the tree. **If your student is struggling in core academic classes, especially in more than one area, it might not be due to misunderstanding the content.**

At Axiom Learning, we understand the frustration and concern of parents and guardians of students who are struggling. We know that it can feel like trying to fight an uphill battle. However, we also know that with the proper support and intervention, your child can thrive and be successful in the classroom. We are here to help you and your child work smarter, not harder, to overcome any learning challenges or struggles.

Axiom Learning was founded by Harvard graduates who are parents themselves. As parents, we have been frustrated by the one-size-fits-all approach to education, where every student gets the same type of instruction regardless of how easy or difficult the material is or how they like to learn. We have lived through the same struggles that so many others describe. We find it particularly frustrating that many of our kids are regularly told they aren't successful when, really, all they need is some targeted support.

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At Axiom Learning, we take the time to assess your child's strengths and weakness and develop a comprehensive plan to help him succeed. Synthesizing groundbreaking neuroscience research and therapeutic developments across a number of specialties, Axiom Learning has created a comprehensive, foundational learning program that advances a student's underdeveloped sensory-motor, cognitive processing, and executive functioning skills with an eye towards transferring these skills to everyday contexts. The general applicability of these underlying skills yields growth and development across different domains of a student's life.

8. Conclusion

Many difficulties exhibited at the academic level are actually the result of foundational skill challenges, such as developing executive functioning, processing, or sensory motor skills. As a result, mainstream remedial plans often don't achieve their anticipated results.

Instead, parents and educators should focus on identifying and addressing the underlying challenges impacting a students' ability to perform to the best of their ability. Students' sensory motor, cognitive processing, and executive functioning profiles don't have to limit their potential. With the right support, every student can harness and transform these foundational skills to thrive in school and life.

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