

Success Outside of School

There's More to Life than School

School can be a tough place for kids with learning difficulties. Academic demands, coupled with feelings that he's different from his peers, can lead to stress and frustration and may be the first step on the road to damaged self-esteem.

You know this recipe all too well. You watch your child work twice as hard as his classmates to complete homework assignments and see him equating academic difficulty with being a failure.

As an adult, you know that there's much more to life than school. You know that success and self-esteem have little to do with grade-point averages. But kids may have trouble seeing beyond the school routine. You can help your child gain some perspective, and a self-esteem boost, by guiding him toward activities that play to his strengths and offer opportunities for success.

When looking for ways to make your child feel successful, consider this: No one knows him as well as you do. **You understand his strengths, weaknesses, and interests better than anyone.** Use this knowledge when choosing activities, even if it means bypassing what all the other kids in the neighborhood are doing in favor of something more suited to him.

Finally, a key to success in any activity is that it's appropriate for his age or developmental level. Be sure to consider your child's level of maturity and his social comfort zone. If he feels more comfortable with slightly younger kids, investigate groups or classes that span a range.

Suggested Strategies

Extracurricular activities

- Enroll him in activities outside school: Clubs, sports, art, and music offer athletic and creative opportunities for your child. With your guidance, let him select activities that he's interested in. Set him up to succeed by doing your homework before signing up.
- For all extracurricular activities, collaborate (<http://www.schwablearning.org/Articles.asp?r=74&d=5>) with group leaders and coaches about your child's learning difficulties. The leader will be able to work with him more effectively, and he'll learn that a learning difficulty is not something to hide.
- Find out if a class or club is based on interest or aptitude — be sure that you're not enrolling your child who is merely curious about astronomy in a club for astronomy experts!
- Ask about the typical activities and match them with your child's energy level — classes with lectures or a lot of quiet time could be a poor match for a restless child.
- Attend a meeting or two with your child on a trial basis. Be sure the leader's style and pace are compatible with your child's.
- For a child who works best in small groups, consider private or semi-private lessons rather than large classes.
- If your child is interested in sports, let him explore a variety of options. Help ensure success by practicing new skills between team meetings. For the child who is uncomfortable in a team environment, consider individual sports, such as swimming, ice skating, or martial arts. These types of activities focus less on social skills and teamwork and offer many small milestones to mark success and improvement.

Activities at Home

- Give your child daily or weekly jobs: His success with regular chores will help him develop a sense of responsibility and the knowledge that he's contributing to the family.
- If he's interested, let him help with special projects like painting or carpentry.
- For the child who has difficulty with organization or memory, set out everything he'll need to accomplish his daily or weekly jobs without nagging or frustration.
- Let your child teach you or others: Kids naturally love to teach and help others.
- Encourage your child to become an expert in something that interests him. Whether it's dinosaurs, or baseball, or rocks, or butterflies, nourish his innate curiosity by providing books and tapes and taking family field trips related to his interest.
- Let his teachers know about his special knowledge and expertise. Your child will love knowing more than most adults and will be delighted when you or his classmates come to him for answers.
- Play with your child: Play for play's sake is a great way to relax and have fun together.
- Let your child lead. Join him in activities that he enjoys and is good at. Computer or video games are an area where he may have more skill than you — let him show you how far he can progress while you're still stuck on level one.

Exposure to a wide variety of activities contributes to learning in fun and non-stressful ways. Don't force your child to excel, but let him enjoy many new experiences. Help him set realistic goals and celebrate the small achievements. With each success, you'll see your child gain confidence that will spill over into other areas of his life.

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Other Resources

Websites

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)
The Impact of After-School Programs That Promote Personal and Social Skills
<http://www.casel.org/downloads/ASP-Full.pdf>