

Catching learning difficulties early can help you help your child realise his full potential.

By **Veena Patwardhan**



# New hope for **SLOW LEARNERS**

“Mummy, this is too hard for me!” Does your child let out a similar cry of despair each time he struggles with homework? And while his frustration makes you wince, do you often feel your patience being stretched to breaking point? You’re trying your best, yet your child fails to understand even simple concepts. Perhaps you’re thinking it’s because he’s more interested in playing than studying. Well, perhaps you need to think again. For chances are, your child could be grappling with a real problem, a problem that is faced by one out of every five or six

children — your child could be a slow learner.

All parents want their child to be bright and excel in studies. The truth is, not every child will be able to fulfil these parental desires. That’s because, just as children have dissimilar features, they also have different intelligence levels.

Only about 25 per cent of all people have above normal intelligence, whereas around 50 per cent have average intelligence. There are two categories of children who have below normal intelligence — slow learners and the mentally retarded. Just two per cent, having an IQ less than 75, are

considered to be mentally deficient. Slow learners are those with borderline intelligence. They have an IQ ranging from 75 to 90, and constitute around 20 to 23 per cent of the population. But such kids are not unintelligent. They CAN learn, though maybe not as easily or quickly as other children their age. They may not possess intellectual skills, but they could have other talents and the capacity to develop these if the right support is provided in time.

## **CATCH THEM EARLY**

In the first few years of primary school, slow learners manage to

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cope despite a little difficulty with reading, writing and mathematics. But after that, they begin to struggle with all the subjects and the gap between them and their classmates begins to widen. If your child is facing similar problems, he needs help, and he needs it fast.

Mumbai-based clinical psychologist and counsellor Bhawana Kerkar, who runs the Umang Centre for Autistic and Slow Learners, says, "After their children repeatedly fail in exams, parents start looking for solutions. They enforce an increase in study hours, send the kids for one or more tuitions, put a ban on watching TV, start beating the kids or even give them memory tonics. It is only after everything else fails that most parents look for professional help." Kerkar emphasises that the best remedial action is to get an IQ test done at the earliest, for only then can the exact cause of a child's learning problem and the perfect mode of further treatment be determined.

If the IQ test reveals that your child is a slow learner, although you won't be happy with the result, don't grieve over it or blame

yourself or your spouse. Actually, there are two possible causes for borderline intelligence. The first is medical; the second is genetic. But don't waste time finding out what made things go wrong. Rather, focus on helping your child tackle the learning problem and develop his talents.

There is no cure for low intellectual capacity. But scientific studies have shown that a child's learning skills can be enhanced through timely stimulation, and that changes in mental capacity are greatest during early childhood. Conversely, lack of early academic stimulation and parental support could result in a slow learner getting caught in the downward spiral of frustration, hopelessness, loss of self-esteem, and even mental health problems. Therefore, the earlier your child's learning problem is identified and addressed, the better the chances of spurring him on to reach his full potential.

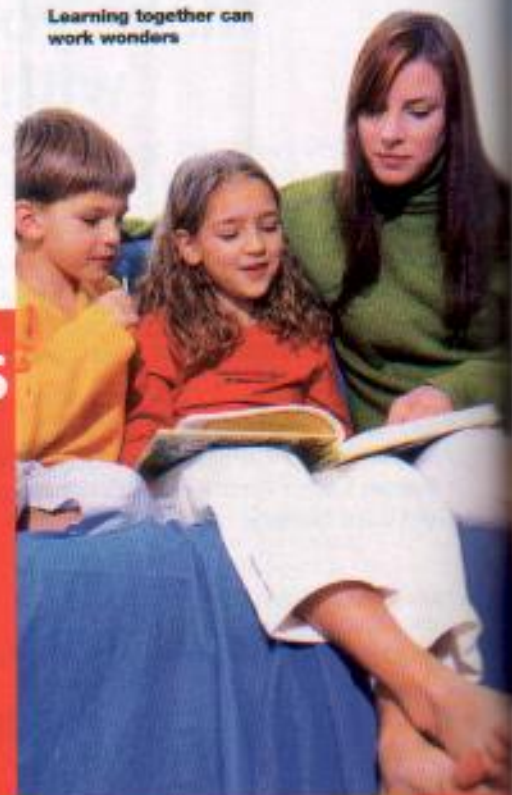
## **NIOS: A WONDERFUL NEW OPTION FOR SLOW LEARNERS**

Sadly, since slow learners are neither mentally retarded nor

learning disabled (like dyslexics or those with ADHD), they don't qualify for the special services or facilities made available to these groups within traditional education programmes. And till a few years ago, parents had no other choice but to enrol their slow learner child into a regular school, and get a trained after-school tutor or psychologist to coach him if it was seen to be necessary.

But, now there's a more satisfactory option — the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS), a special system of education established by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, in 1989, to better accommodate the special needs of 'the differently abled'.

**Learning together can work wonders**



## **PARENTING SLOW LEARNERS**

- \* Believe in them and they will believe in themselves.
- \* Encourage, but don't push them. Appreciate and accept their best efforts. Have patience; give them more time to complete tasks.
- \* Don't be overprotective; expose them to different situations and gently give them the freedom to test their own abilities.
- \* Never underestimate their potential; motivate them to develop their talents.

- \* Make information as concrete as possible. If they can see and touch things, learning will be easier.
- \* Explore academic and career options together with them, always taking into account their interests, limitations and strengths.
- \* Maintain a sense of humour and take time to smell the roses.
- \* Don't be hard on yourself or your spouse; a cheerful parent is always a better parent.



## SALIENT FEATURES

- \* School dropouts and those who cannot pursue mainstream academic programmes can appear for the NIOS std X and std XII certification exams; these are equivalent to the Maharashtra Board, ICSE and CBSE exams.
- \* Being a distance education programme, there's no need to enrol for regular classes.
- \* Students can pick five or six subjects of their choice, with a minimum of one language (instead of the two or three that other Boards demand). Mathematics is not compulsory.
- \* Students can study at their own pace and need not sit for all the subject examinations at one time.
- \* Those who don't intend to study beyond std XII can choose up to two vocational subjects as part of the five or six subjects.
- \* Successful candidates are eligible to join mainstream junior or senior

colleges anywhere in India.

\* To find out more about NIOS, log on to [www.nios.org](http://www.nios.org). There are NIOS accredited institutions all over the country. So consult your child's class teacher regarding these or about learning centres in your area that prepare children for the NIOS exams. Caroline D'Souza, Student Counsellor and Co-coordinator of Gnyanoday, a remedial education programme for slow learners and the learning disabled at Don Bosco's High School, Borivli, Mumbai, says, "Gnyanoday offers a Pre-NIOS programme for children aged 10 to 15 years, in addition to the NIOS std X and std XII classes. Our special classes stimulate the all-round development of children by providing them with the benefits of regular schooling as well as opportunities to develop their talents in leadership, dramatics, sports, computers and other extra-curricular activities. We also teach them compensatory skills like time management and effective study habits." She points out that the fact that almost 80 per cent of Gnyanoday students join regular colleges for std XI or std XII is proof that children with learning difficulties can blossom when placed in the right environment.

## BE THEIR GREATEST CHEERLEADER

Slow learners are normal kids with a healthy curiosity about the world around them. They want to learn. But they 'fail' because the traditional education system makes them compete with students of all other ability levels, without taking into consideration their special learning needs.

Citing the example of her own school, Don Bosco's, that permits 'weaker' students extra time to complete their exam papers, D'Souza asserts, "There's nothing to stop other regular schools from making similar concessions within

the mainstream education system for those with learning difficulties." She adds, "Schools should also encourage co-operative learning projects and 'buddy learning', because fellow students can often explain things to slow learners better than teachers or private tutors do."

But can parents themselves tutor a slow learning child? "Yes", says D'Souza, "but in most cases, only till std VI or std VII, and provided they adopt certain techniques." Referring to one such technique, she explains, "Slow learners cannot remember learned material as well as average students. So, rather than pressurising them to mug up whole paragraphs, parents should always teach them to remember just the main points."

State authors Carolyn Warnemuende and John H Samson, in their book, 'Underachievement: Reversing the Process', "To expect that your child will become a doctor, lawyer, or teacher is not reasonable. To know that he has the potential for responsible employment in a worthwhile job is realistic and appropriate." So, why be unduly worried? Instead, help your slow learner child to build on his strengths. This could pave the way to his success in later life.

## LAUNCH THEM INTO A WIDER WORLD

The problem faced by slow learners is mainly academic. In the career marketplace, some doors may be closed to them, but scores of alternative career options are wide open. As Kerkar affirms, "Slow learners have the potential to develop their talents and lead productive lives."

Of course, they can't be expected to do this alone. As informed parents, YOU can give them the power to help themselves and live with dignity as fully functioning members of society. **F**