

"Learning and Attention Disorders: A Guide for Parents and Teachers" by William Feldman, MD, FRCPC, published by Key Porter Books, 2000, 195 pages. Available at the Castlegar and District Public Library. Reviewed by Robert M. Macrae, Instructor of Integrated Environmental Planning Technology, Selkirk College.

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As a community college instructor, I wonder periodically whether I'm teaching a student with an undiagnosed learning disability and more importantly "what can I do to help?" In this regard, I'm not alone. A recent survey of Canadian and American teachers found that 80% felt that they had taught children with undiagnosed Attention Deficit and Hyperactive Disorder. Here's a good book for that readership.

"Learning and Attention Disorders: A Guide for Parents and Teachers" is a balanced, easy-to-read, every-person's review of learning disorders, their diagnoses and treatments. The book also discusses falsehoods and myths surrounding learning disorders. Dr. Feldman is a qualified author. He is a Professor Emeritus in the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Toronto and former Head of General Pediatrics at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto. He has many years of practice treating children affected by learning disabilities in conjunction with their families, their teachers and other health and social-care workers.

The first chapter, "Sorting through the Information Glut" is worth reading even if you have no interest in learning disorders. Like Feldman, we all read, see or hear an overwhelming amount of health and dietary advice. It's difficult to decide what is useful, useless and dangerous. Feldman offers clear advice on how to separate the valid from the flawed. Feldman gives three characteristics of scientific evidence; he explains how a valid statistical survey must be conducted and why the evidence from such a survey may not automatically be accepted into what he calls evidence-based medicine. Feldman explains terms we've heard: twin and family studies, randomized controlled trials and double-blind studies. Feldman discusses junk science, pseudoscience and non-science. He is the serpent in the Garden of Eden, his fruit is a template for critical thought, but listen to him hiss with a smile from between the lines that the final choice is ours.

Feldman addresses dyslexia and reading problems. Not all reading problems are a result of dyslexia and Feldman gives a list of symptoms and causes. Feldman defines dyslexia as a problem traced to differences in the structure, chemistry and functioning of the brain which leads to phonological processing. This means people with dyslexia have trouble connecting the written form of a word with its sound. He leads us through the miraculous steps of learning to hear then speaking and finally reading a language.

In English there are twenty-six letters, forty-four possible sounds, but 577 possible combinations of letters and sounds. Well, I know different letter combinations make the hard 'a' sound in words like ate, eight and great ... it's confusing eh, but 577, well I say!

Feldman compares phonics and whole language as two poles in the spectrum of reading instruction. Phonics was developed at the end of the nineteenth century. It teaches children to break a word into its component sounds in order to say it. Children learn the sounds of individual letters then of letter combinations and finally whole-word recognition. There is much repetition of dry prose. In whole language reading instruction, a newer approach to teaching children to read, the basic unit is a whole word not letters or letter combinations. The emphasis is on word meanings. Children read more interesting stories and there is less repetition. Children are exposed to vocabulary with irregular spelling sooner. Children are encouraged to guess unknown words based on context or simply ignore some words and continue with the narrative. Feldman admits to oversimplifying, but states that children's brains are quite amazing and lots of

children will learn to read regardless of the method of reading instruction used.

However, for the five to ten percent of children with dyslexia, the whole language method does not work at all. No matter how gifted or talented the teacher, no matter how creative and stimulating the environment, dyslexic children cannot decode the words on the page. These children suffer, they come to believe that they are stupid and in Dr. Feldman's experience the most effective treatment is remedial phonics-based reading instruction. Feldman explores alternative theories regarding causes and treatments for dyslexia, but he returns to what's been proven to work - phonics.

Feldman examines writing, spelling and math (dysgraphia, dysorthographia and discalculia) - problems that can affect otherwise bright children and describes methods to bypass these learning disorders. Dr. Feldman also discards dyspraxia as the "diagnosis de jour."

Dr. Feldman's longest chapter is on Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHA). He explains this condition as defined by the American Psychiatric Association. He discusses ADHD diagnosis, causes, and treatment. He examines the use of medication, like methylphenidate (Ritalin), to treat ADHA. Ritalin, surprising to me, is a stimulant. It has been used since 1959 to help hyperactive children become less distracted and less overactive. Feldman reviews studies supporting Ritalin use for treatment of ADHD, concerns regarding side effects, dependency and alternative treatments. His conclusions are straight forward and reassuring for parents and teachers concerned about children with ADHD.

Dr. Feldman repeats the saws, "get a second opinion" and "seek support." He devotes a chapter to organizations dedicated to supporting parents and teachers with children with learning disorders and he lists several books and a journal on learning disorders. There is a detailed references section and a thorough index.

This is excellent book for parents of school-age children, teachers, school administrators, health and social-care workers and anybody curious about learning disorders or just the quirky workings of our brains.