

How to Support a Student with Unique Learning Needs

By Alexandra Berube

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Teaching my second year of Kindergarten, one of my students came in with a rare condition: Agenesis of the Corpus Callosum. This is a complete or partial absence of the corpus callosum, the band connecting the two hemispheres in the brain. It was not known how deeply this would affect his development, but his learning would clearly be shaped entirely by his brain's ability to share, process, and store information.

I should explain that I am not a teacher with a Special Education background--I have a Master's Degree in Early Childhood Education and I am certified in this field; however, I was not trained to teach students with Special Needs beyond how to incorporate modifications into lesson plans and how to read an IEP. I had worked with students with Asperger's, Sensory Integration Dysfunction, ADD, ADHD, Dyslexia, and Autism, but never had I had complete responsibility for the education of a student with needs such as these.

This student is now in 3rd grade, and I have had the honor of being able to watch him grow, tutoring him on and off ever since he graduated from my classroom. Tutors are often assigned students to work with, not knowing what to expect, and they are being given the opportunity to test the limits of their creativity and their patience. It is truly an opportunity, a gift, to have this chance to bring out what this child has to offer.

Over the years I have watched this student learn everything backwards. By that I mean, in order to hear a rhyme, he had to be able to read the word first: Do cat and hat rhyme? They both visually end in '-at,' so yes. But he couldn't hear the rhyme.

He can do multi-digit addition and subtraction, with carrying and borrowing. But he has to count on his fingers, even to subtract 3 from 3. Theoretically, he can't do math facts in his head at all. Each year, we have retaught him how to add and subtract, and he has several strategies that work for him--he physically 'catches' the small number and counts up to the big number to subtract, and 'catches' the big number and adds the small number from there for addition. It's tactile, and that's how his brain allows him to add and subtract. But it does seem illogical to watch a student add 2 plus 3 on his fingers and then see him add 23,908 to 13,208 with carrying, with ease.

This is not how children are supposed to learn, according to common belief. You are supposed to teach children in a certain order, because that's how their brain develops. But what if their

brain needs to develop a different way? What if their brain makes connections in a completely new and circuitous way, that leaves you, the tutor, baffled time and time again? What if that's okay?

Tutoring a student who learns differently, for any reason, means shedding your beliefs of what is the right order to teach content. It means not drilling in one concept over and over until they get it, because you think they can't move onto the next concept until they get this one.

All students learn in leaps and bounds, which may mean skipping over one concept, moving onto the next one, and weaving back around, 'absorbing' that 'previous' concept into their learning schema long after it logically makes sense for them to do so.

Every student deserves the chance to learn at their own pace, and it takes understanding on the part of the tutor that this may be the right way for them.

About Alexandra Berube



Alexandra is the Managing Director of Boston Tutoring Services, a tutoring company that offers one-to-one in-home tutoring in Massachusetts. She is also a former Kindergarten teacher who also tutors students in grades K-8, in all subject areas, including test preparation.

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