A Multidisciplinary approach to help a child with learning difficulties

An osteopathic assessment of the child is of paramount importance to ensure that they are physically balanced, and that there is no undue strain in the body that is causing or aggravating the learning problem.

Neurodevelopmental movement therapies may be recommended where there are retained primitive reflexes, to help the development of co-ordination.

Nutritional deficiencies/Chemical sensitivities/Food allergies are also important to investigate, as they can impair learning and concentration.

A visual assessment by a Behavioural Optometrist is helpful to identify any visual problems.

A hearing test is recommended where there is a history of glue ear, or other reasons to suspect hearing loss.

A listening test can be performed in a child that shows signs of auditory processing disorder even if there is a normal hearing test.

Sound therapy can be successful in helping children with auditory processing issues.

Specialised teaching is essential. Ideally, therapists and teachers should work together to find the best way of helping each child.

References
1. Frymann V. Learning difficulties of children viewed in the light of the Osteopathic Concept JAOA 76:46-61
2. Frymann V. Effect of Osteopathic medical management on neurological development in children JAOA 92:729-744

Osteopathic Treatment may help

- Unsettled babies/reflux
- Breast feeding issues
- Pregnancy and birth problems
- Sleep difficulties
- Ear and sinus infections
- ADHD/autism
- Co-ordination difficulties
- Constipation/bedwetting
- Back, neck and joint pain
- Headaches and migraines
- Digestive disorders
- Menstrual issues
- Asthma and chest complaints
- General ill health

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About Learning Difficulties

Learning difficulties may prevent children from realising their full potential. Although each child is an individual with their own unique learning path, there are certain common features to learning. Learning difficulties (including dyslexia and dyspraxia) can be broadly categorised by two main causes:

**Neurological**: an inability of the brain to process information correctly.

**Physical**: an inability of the musculoskeletal system to respond appropriately to orders from the brain.

Osteopathy can help both types to varying degrees. Learning difficulties can be caused, maintained and aggravated by physical strain and discomfort in a child's body. This can affect the organisational development of both the brain and the musculoskeletal system. The most common cause of this is unresolved strain from the birth process. Research performed by Dr Frymann found that in a sample of 106 children with no learning difficulties 28.3% had a history of considerable birth trauma, whereas, of 103 with learning difficulties 72.8% had a history of a traumatic birth.

Development of the brain

After birth, there is still much growth and development yet to occur in the brain. Physical strain within the cranium may cause disorganisation of the central nervous system if untreated. The area of the skull behind the ear is particularly vulnerable to compression during the birth process. This is the region that deals with language and word recognition, and is sometimes implicated in dyslexic children. Early treatment in this region may limit the severity of any learning difficulty developing.

Effects of physical strain in a child

A child who is physically uncomfortable may not complain of aches and pains. The stresses have probably been present since birth or after a childhood fall, and have become ‘normal’ for that child. They may be affected at a subtle level and display any or all of the following characteristics:

- The child may be fidgety and restless, find sitting still difficult, and prefer to be on the move.
- Concentration is often poor and the child is easily distracted.
- Volatile behaviour, in the same way that any person who is feeling tense may overreact emotionally.
- Light sleeper, often finding it difficult to drop off to sleep at night.
- Clumsiness and poor balance. The child may fall a lot, often seeming to bump the same part of their body (such as the head!).
- Handwriting is laborious and often untidy.
- Fatigue.

Indications of retained birth stresses

Learning difficulties do not suddenly happen. There are usually indications before attending school. Likewise the signs of physical stress are often present from birth onwards.

Birth is arguably the most stressful event of a child's life, imposing enormous stress on the baby, in particular on the head. Much of this resolves naturally in the first few weeks of life, but if the pressures have been too great then varying amounts of strain and distortion can remain locked in the child's body as they grow. Babies with retained physical strain may cry excessively with colic or reflux, have poor sleep patterns and/or breast feeding issues. The child may crawl and walk early to relieve physical discomfort. The toddler may find it difficult to concentrate for any length of time. Behaviour is often at the difficult end of ‘normal’ toddler behaviour! A depleted immune system is common, causing ear infections which can lead to hearing loss and speech delay. Finally, physical compression may cause headaches, growing pains and stomach aches. Initially the child may be able to overcome these difficulties, and appear to be reaching developmental milestones. However, as demands are placed on the child at school, they slowly fall behind, and a ‘learning difficulty’ is identified.

Osteopathic Treatment

Cranial Osteopathic treatment is very gentle, safe and effective for treating children with learning or developmental difficulties. Specific gentle pressure is applied where necessary to enable the inherent healing ability of the body to effect the release of stresses. Osteopathic treatment can help in improving concentration, coordination, fine and gross motor skills, and auditory and visual processing issues. Teachers and parents often notice that after a course of osteopathic treatment the child seems to grasp new concepts more easily.

On average 4-6 treatments are required, but this varies according to the age of the child and the severity of the problem.