

Taking the brakes off

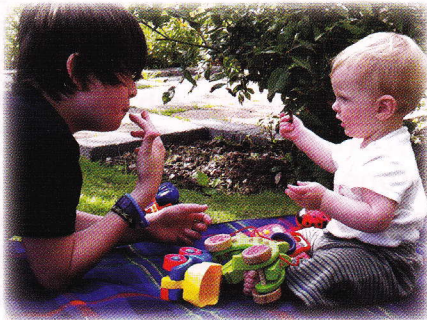
Discoveries about how we can make learning, living and playing easier for our children and ourselves, from the frontiers of neuroscience.

learning

Our brains are amazing, by far the most complex organ on the planet, and scientists are just beginning to understand more about how learning happens.

In Mali in Western Africa, it is not uncommon to see babies walking at six or seven months. Bendy legs are seen as unattractive so mothers massage and pull their child's legs to straighten them. The inadvertent result is that the children learn to crawl and walk earlier. In Canada, children at the Arrowsmith School in Toronto can increase their reading age by years in a few months as well as their writing and speaking skills by doing simple tracing exercises. It has also been found that older people involved in activities such as learning a musical instrument, ballroom dancing or studying a new language are less likely to get dementia and Alzheimer's.

These are all examples of the amazing plasticity of the brain; how our brains are shaped and remade every day by simple,



often repeated and most importantly, enjoyable activities. Childhood is a particularly important time for brain development but our brains are capable of acquiring new skills, reorganizing and learning to do things better throughout our whole lives.

Judith Bluestone, the founder of HANDLE[®], discovered plasticity through necessity. She was born with multiple learning difficulties and during her childhood instinctively discovered that simple activities (like bouncing on a pogo stick) improved her ability to function and reach her potential.

Although parts of her brain never developed and many others were damaged she is a living example of what the brain can achieve. She learnt to

talk despite missing one of the brain's speech areas and went on to study neuroscience at university. She used her hard won knowledge to help others and to teach the things that she had learned. Through creating rhythmic, organized activities Judith found a way to enhance brain function using gentle stimulation of specific nerve pathways.

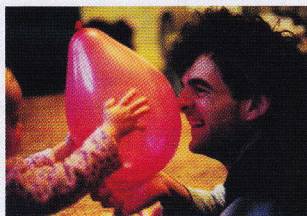
Judith created the HANDLE Institute in 1994, and her HANDLE Activities give us the framework and tools we can use to take the brakes off learning and achieve more of what we want.

Movement is crucial for brain development. For example, when you and your child do physical and rhythmic activities like dancing or swimming this helps improve the brain's inter-connections and functioning. Even walking when done at a good pace has recently been shown to stimulate the growth of new brain cells in adults.

A Canadian study involving more than five hundred school children found that those who spent an hour a day in a gym class far outperformed, at exam time, those who didn't do gym.

HANDLE stands for Holistic Approach to NeuroDevelopment and Learning Efficiency. Personalised Assessments uncover hindrances to learning and a unique HANDLE Programme is created to help achieve goals. Some wish to improve their concentration, writing, ball sports, communication, social skills or even sleep. Clients are given simple, easy to learn activities that can be done alone or by the whole family, taking in total twenty to forty minutes per day. The activities have

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HANDLE[®] with Sean Williams

Enhancing learning for your child and the whole family

Individual assessments & programmes

Free evening talks:

20 March, 24 April, 29 May & 3 August

Introductory days:

12 May, 4-5 August & 19 October

"I would not have believed that Ester could make such a big leap in her development after just one session." Maja mother of 2 year old Ester.

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similarities with massage and movement games and stimulate parts of the brain to enhance their function.

Enjoyment and playfulness is particularly important in HANDLE. Neuroscientific research is showing that lasting plastic change happens when we pay close attention to what we are doing, as we do when we are really engaged in playful activity. Studies also show that play actually makes children smarter, more cooperative and flexible, helping with social adjustment in later life and even reducing crime. Our understanding of the web-like interrelationships of the brain means that we are careful not to stress systems during HANDLE programmes. We know that stress disrupts activity in the complex thinking parts of the brain. You may have noticed that when you are tired, ill or stressed that things take longer and are less fun. Practicing Gentle Enhancement® means that we we keep a look out for signs of stress such as flushing in the face, changes in breathing or just wanting to stop. This kind of attention to detail means that the programme can be finely tuned to suit the individual, making it much effective and enjoyable.

Nancy, who came to see me when she was nine, needed extra help with maths and reading. She was also

struggling with her ballet and piano and was really shy in large groups and wanted to feel more confident. We gave her some HANDLE activities that she could do with her mum and by herself through the day. One of them was the Crazy Straw which involved sucking water throughout the day through a curly straw to help the eyes to work together more efficiently. The movement of the eyes is important for things like reading, writing and ball sports and regular rhythmic sucking stimulates the muscles that converge the eyes.

Each time she came back to see us to update her programme she was a little more confident, with her natural grace and beauty shining brighter and brighter. Her piano improved as did her maths and reading and she has become an enthusiastic key player in school musicals. Everything we do requires our brain. The more efficient it is the more we can do with pleasure and ease. HANDLE gives us simple, easy and fun ways to improve what we do and how we do it. Human beings are incredible and we've yet to find a limit to what we can learn and achieve with the right support and a little focus. We just have to know how to take the brakes off!

If you would like to learn more about HANDLE and how to help your child learn with more ease and enjoyment, come to one of our evening talks or call if you'd like a chat. We look forward to seeing you!

For more information, references, and where to buy Crazy Straws see: www.seanwilliams.co.uk



Sleep

Some children sleep better than others. Just as in adults, there is a huge variation in the amount of sleep children need. Roughly a quarter of children have significant sleeping difficulties, and those who have learning disabilities or a condition such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are most prone to sleep problems. Poor sleeping can contribute to other behavioural difficulties, exhausting all the family and putting a strain on relationships. Many families accept sleep problems as a normal part of life without realising how much these contribute to behavioural difficulties. Fortunately, most sleep problems are relatively easy to treat.

Babies and toddlers

Your sleep is likely to be disrupted frequently in the first year of your baby's life, however well you manage the timing. It is essential that you get enough sleep yourself to make sure that you can cope. If your child will not sleep, try to get someone to take over while you catch up on naps. Some parents get caught up into a habit of going to bed with their children and singing them to sleep for hours and end up exhausted as a result with little time for themselves. Others sleep with the child through the night and this works well in some cultures. This may be appropriate for newborn babies, but eventually there will come a time when you will probably feel the need for the privacy of your own bedroom. The key to achieving this is to realise that your child can learn to fall asleep without your involvement. You can teach her this by taking her to bed while she is awake, and gradually, if she won't settle, extending the amount of time that you leave her alone, with brief reassurances as necessary. Your child needs to learn to be separate from you and, the longer you keep her close,

the harder the separation will become.

If you have particular problems with getting your child to sleep, sleep clinics run by health visitors can be very helpful; ask your GP or health visitor for more information.

Bedtime rules and routines for young children

Bedtime is a time of separation and will be affected by the quality of the relationship between you and your child. An insecure child will find it harder to settle. Your child may have missed you all day and want to prolong his time with you by asking for stories, toilet visits and glasses of water.

You will be most successful if you have clear rules about these and a set bedtime that you can stick to. Bedtime should not be so early that your child then wakes too early in the morning.

On the other hand, being overtired can make a child too distressed to settle at night. Your child may also want to stay up later if he is afraid of the dark or is jealous of the fact that the