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An Interview with Brock and Fernette Eide: The Mislabeled Child

Written By: [Michael F. Shaughnessy Senior Columnist EducationNews.org](#) 10-1-07

Michael F. Shaughnessy Senior Columnist [EdNews.org](#)

Eastern New Mexico University

Brock and Fernette Eide have recently written a book entitled "The Mislabeled Child". Published by Hyperion out of New York last year, the book is a very critical examination of the issues regarding learning difficulties, learning disabilities and the entire issue of labeling and misdiagnosis.

This book examines some domains that bear examination in the issue of learning disabilities. The authors critically examine the role of attention, visual problems, hearing difficulties and language problems. The terms "dyslexia" and "dysgraphia" are explored, with a fresh new look at some of the other often neglected issues in learning disabilities, or differences.

These are the social, emotional, language, and family issues that are prevalent and relevant to the situation. The book also explores some often neglected realms such as Central Auditory Processing Disorder, sensory processing disorder, and autism and what they term as "autism-like" disorders. They further examine the problems that even gifted children face in the contemporary classroom.

This is an excellent book for those individuals who are working daily with children who have been diagnosed (perhaps incorrectly) with some type of attention deficit, or learning problem. The authors remind me of good clinical teachers of yesteryear who would critically and clinically examine each and every child for strengths and weaknesses, and then ascertain the basic problem and try to rectify and remediate it. The authors are further, good educational psychologists (although M.D.'s by training) who understand the learning process. The authors take an in-depth look at learning problems and offer suggestions, advice and guidance along the way.

This book reminds me of Dr. Janet Lerner who has spent her life trying to assist children with learning difficulties and problems. Dr. Lerner was a keen observer of children, and a clinical teacher and was highly skilled in remediation.

For those individuals who are sincerely interested in helping students with learning difficulties, I would recommend this book. However, it will take a while to read it, as it is very comprehensive. And this book is really for those individuals who are working with students in depth. It is not for those who simply want to hand a calculator to a child with a "learning disability in math" or simply hand a child with a difficulty in spelling a dictionary. Children with learning problems in school deserve an in depth exploration of the reasons why they may be having problems and this book offers an excellent comprehensive overview of how to assist these children and adolescents.

In this interview, the authors respond to some questions about the realm of learning disabilities and learning difficulties and how to closely explore and examine the reasons for those problems.

1. What are your basic premises in *The Mislabeled Child*?

There are several. Our first premise is that different children have different learning styles, and that it's important to take these differences into account when deciding how to educate them. When we talk about a child's learning style, what we really mean is "how that child best learns and processes information," and different children can differ greatly in this regard. A given child's learning style is determined by how that child best takes in information (which we call *Information Input*), what that child's best form of memory and imagery is (which we call *Pattern Processing*), what that child's best form of expressing information is (which we call *Information Output*), and how and in what setting that child best pays attention (which we refer to simply as *Attention*). We can understand best how to teach a given child when we understand these facts about how he or she processes

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information, so we can tailor the educational experience to take advantage of this information processing style. Many children that we see who are struggling in their current educational environment are capable of learning very well in the right setting, but their current educational setting is not well suited to their needs.

The second premise in the book is that when children are struggling in school, it's important not to simply start and stop by labeling their behaviors, but to look more deeply into why they're struggling to find the true sources for their learning challenges. For a variety of reasons, the tendency in recent years has been to funnel children who are struggling either academically or behaviorally into one of a few diagnostic categories that are defined essentially entirely on the basis of visible behaviors, like ADHD, or oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), or autism spectrum disorders. Unfortunately, when too much adult attention becomes focused on the child's visible behaviors of inattention or hyperactivity, these deeper problems get overlooked. For example, one of the biggest problems we see currently is that when a child is struggling in the classroom, the focus immediately zeros in on whether he or she is behaving in ways that suggest a problem with attention. The problem is that almost any child who's struggling for whatever reason will have difficulty paying attention. But there can be many reasons for difficulties focusing. Some children really will have a primary problem with attention. But in our experience, many more will have problems in other areas, like visual or auditory processing, sensorimotor regulation, subtle language problems or dyslexia, or other specific challenges that require their own specific treatments. If we fail to notice these deeper problems, we may improve a child's behavior through the use of drugs or other treatments, but fail to help them develop in ways that really address the root causes of their problems and enable them to develop into the learners they are capable of being.

The third premise is that there really is tremendous reason for optimism in our approach to children who are struggling. Over the past several decades there's been an enormous burst of research that's documented the incredible "plasticity" or modifiability of the brain's processing pathways in response to targeted inputs, or specific forms of intervention and therapy. There's also been a growing body of research regarding the kinds of alternative pathways that can be used to get around specific blocks in learning. One of our primary goals in writing *The Mislabeled Child* was to encourage people to think more creatively about troubleshooting children's learning challenges by showing them how much opportunity there really is for helping children with all kinds of problems to learn.

2. Who should read it and why?

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Little Girl's Recovery on TodayShow Retrain Ears/Brain to Listen Better
www.SoundTherapySystems.com

The Mislabeled Child will be helpful for anyone who's dealing with children who are struggling to learn, whether parents, teachers, or other professionals. We've intentionally written it in such a way that those who are primarily looking for practical solutions to help struggling children can find them in clearly laid out sections, but that those who are looking for more extensive explanations of the underlying causes of learning challenges can find those, too.

3. What is your take on ADHD? Are these kids out of control, etc.

The biggest problems with the ADHD label as it's currently defined is that this diagnosis is made entirely on the basis of observable behaviors, like whether a child appears to act impulsively, or is fidgety, or inattentive, etc. Yet as anyone who's ever spent time around children knows, they can show these behaviors for many different reasons. While identifying children who show a certain number of these behaviors may be a good way of identifying children who need help to function better, it really doesn't tell you very much about the source of their difficulties. In fact, by creating the impression that these behaviors can be safely attributed to a brain-based disorder called ADHD without further need for investigation, it can lead people to overlook important contributions to a child's difficulties with behavior. We have a whole chapter in *The Mislabeled Child* that deals specifically with the topic of attention, and we talk about many of the different things that go into helping a child pay attention and exert control over their own behavior. As we discuss in that chapter, it really isn't possible to make any categorical statements about children diagnosed with ADHD, other than that they show some of the kinds of behaviors that are listed in the definition itself. Poor parenting can certainly contribute to ADHD-type behaviors in some cases: The temperamentally intense and active child who is never taught any appropriate boundaries on behavior--whom we sometimes refer to as suffering from "No-Deprivation Syndrome"--is usually well on the road to the ADHD diagnosis. But even well-raised children can show ADHD-type behaviors for a variety of reasons that we describe in our book, so it's important to carefully troubleshoot the source of each child's behavioral difficulties. As we say in our book, when your laptop breaks down you don't simply declare that it's got "laptop deficit disorder" and prescribe some generic treatment, you investigate until you find the specific problem then apply a specific solution. The same approach should be taken to children with ADHD-type behaviors.

4. The term "learning disabilities" has always been a kind of "garbage basket" term. What new insights do you bring?

One change we would really like to bring about through our work is to erode the fallacy that children can be accurately sorted into groups like "learning disabled" and "normal learners." Our concept of learning styles is really the key to this. Children don't just come into the world as either "normal" or "defective," but possessing an incredibly broad and varied range of different capacities and ways of learning, and an approach to education that's based on the notion that all "normal" children should be able to learn through a single standard approach to teaching is bound for trouble from the very beginning. In truth, some children learn much better by watching demonstrations or participating in enactments. Others learn better by listening to descriptions. Others by reading about things. If a child is a great visual learner it's a mistake to think of them simply as a defective auditory learner if they have trouble paying attention to and processing long auditory instructions. We tend to create a lot of "learning disabilities" by providing too narrow a range of learning opportunities for children. Now, this is not at all to dispute the notion that children who are having difficulty, for example, learning to read and write need special help, and that they really are facing a special kind of learning challenge. But we do need to pay more attention to the fact that these same children often have special skills in oral expression, or auditory learning, or in complex pattern recognition, or visual-spatial processing, and by failing to recognize that they may just naturally be on a different kind of developmental pathway that's starting from a different place and heading in a different direction, we often end up overlooking the strengths these children possess and treating them as defective print-based learners. We need to pay greater attention to the fact that adults can succeed and function well with all sorts of skill sets, and that we need to provide greater opportunity for children with specialized skill sets while they're going through school. We're constantly amazed in our own profession, for example, at how many of the most gifted radiologists and surgeons we know struggled and were even held back in the early years of school. Were these individuals "learning disabled" in second grade, but suddenly became "undisabled" later on? No, they simply had a different way of processing information and a different pathway of development. One of our big missions is to get our educational system to think more carefully about ways to accommodate and nurture these different kinds of learners. Many of the children we see are really remarkably talented and are clearly destined for great things, yet they are struggling to succeed in school because they are given too narrow a range of options to succeed.

5. What advice do you offer to parents of gifted kids?

So far as we know, *The Mislabeled Child* is the only book on learning challenges with an entire chapter devoted to the learning special challenges that arise specifically from intellectual giftedness. Gifted children often struggle in the standard educational environment because they process information differently than many other children, they often have interests that differ dramatically from their peers, and they relate often relate socially much better with older children than to their peers. This frequently leads to misdiagnosis with autism spectrum disorders. Young highly gifted children also frequently show attentional styles that appear superficially similar to ADHD, and often lead to misdiagnosis in this way as well. Many gifted children will also be personally intense and sensitive, and this can lead to battles with perfectionism, and even anxiety and depression. And when intellectually gifted children also have delays in their development or specific learning challenges, this "twice-exceptionality" complicates the picture still further. Just like any other challenge, there's no one-size-fits-all solution for gifted children. Temperament plays a huge role. More easygoing and optimistic children may enjoy the experience of being a leader among their peers. More intense and restless children with very focused interests can be difficult to accommodate in any setting besides homeschooling, and even there it can be a struggle. The two most important pieces of information we can offer to parents of gifted children are as follows. First, character education is crucial. IQ is neither one of the best predictors of adult success nor of adult happiness. IQ is like velocity: if you're headed in the right direction, the faster the better, but if you're going the wrong way, speed kills. Character determines direction. Intellectually gifted children should enjoy and appreciate their abilities, but they shouldn't mistake them for their identity. We see way too many gifted children who are allowed to hijack their whole family and essentially manipulate them for their own purposes. This is an unfortunately effective way of creating a manipulative, self-centered, and unhappy adult. Second, while it's important to help the child develop an appropriately balanced view of their gifts, it's also important to facilitate their development in their area of strengths by providing them with opportunities for enrichment. We have a talk posted on our Website, mislabeledchild.com called "Creating Creative Thinkers" that deals with these issues in detail.

6. What skills do parents need to help their children in this day and age?

One of the first pieces of advice that we give to parents is to allow children the benefit of remaining children until they're emotionally ready for the challenges of adulthood. Parents need to be careful of the exposure they give to younger children not only in terms of entertainment media, but also in terms of news. This holds true for teachers, as well. We see way too many children at very young ages who have already developed an overwhelmingly pessimistic picture of the state of the world, the environment, the economy, the political system, etc., because they've been exposed to needlessly negative messages. When we were kids, we were needlessly traumatized by "duck and cover" drills, as if hiding under our desks would be any protection against the thermonuclear holocaust. Now, we see many sensitive children at an age where they are already very closely in touch with nature who are being traumatized by environmental messages that simply aren't either necessary or appropriate for children their age. When we want to encourage our third graders to develop a sense of environmental stewardship, it's great to take them out to pick up the playground, plant trees, and set up a bird feeder. It's not appropriate to convince them that they're facing an impending environmental apocalypse that they can neither place in any kind of perspective nor do anything to avert. The two most important gifts that any parent can give a child are first, a sense of love, acceptance and security, and second an appreciation for the wonder, beauty, and opportunity that surround them in life. Helping them earn a scholarship to an Ivy League school is way down the list.

7. Is "learning style" a valid concept, and are teachers well trained to cope with these?

We've already discussed in detail our understanding of the nature of learning styles. Regarding training for teachers, no, teachers really aren't well-trained in this area. Fortunately, we're happy to report that the teachers with whom we are in contact through our work with schools are very eager both to learn about and to apply this information. One of the questions we're always asked when we talk about our book or learning styles is, "How can a busy teacher with a class full of students ever hope to deal with so many learning styles?" Our answer is that by designing lessons from the beginning with an understanding of the ways that they can be made memorable and understandable to the greatest number of students will actually reduce a teacher's workload in the long run. It's also a more enjoyable way to teach, both because it's more effective, and because it involves the teacher in creative problem-solving, rather than just being a passive conduit for somebody else's pre-packaged lesson.

8. Are math problems the fault of educational deficiencies or student preference?

There are many reasons why students can struggle with math, and we have a whole chapter on this topic in *The Mislabeled Child*. But we can place this question in context with a few simple points. First, math education in the U.S. is at present in so absolutely abysmal a state that we can hardly find words to describe it. A number of widely publicized reports have recently dealt with the flaws of current practices and ways to remedy these, and we're hopeful that this will change soon. But for parents whose children are currently struggling with math in school, it will often be necessary to take a "back to basics" approach to rebuilding basic skills from the beginning. That said, there are in the second place also about 5 percent of children who have basic problems with number or quantity sense that can make math study difficult, and a much larger number of children who struggle with visual processing, rote memory, language, or reading, that may also complicate math. Some of these children are quite brilliant in other regards. One example of an eminent individual with a seemingly "invincible ignorance" for math was C.S. Lewis, who amassed an absolutely brilliant record as a student at Oxford in classics, philosophy, and English literature, but failed the college qualifying exam in math 3 times and was only admitted to the university because of his service in World War I.

All his life he struggled even to make change for purchases in shops. Incidentally, many very skilled higher mathematicians, including many Nobel Laureates in physics, struggled greatly to learn arithmetic, so there's no reason to keep a child who struggles in introductory math from moving on to higher math if they have the interest and the drive to learn.

9. Do you have a website?

Yes. Our website is MislabeledChild.com, where we have an extensive article library and forum about learning styles, learning challenges, and helpful teaching strategies.

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Excellent, excellent Q&A! I have the book, but will print this interview out to keep on my desk. Thanks for bringing attention to this important book. p.s. Educators and school administrators, please listen to what these authors are saying.

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I went to a lecture last night they gave... Almost made me cry.. I have and am still struggling with the school district about my son.. we have made some head way but not enough... he is now 15 and at my expense has been finally officially diagnosed with dyslexia.. he is behind..needless to say and very very smart.. This book ought to be required reading for every teacher everywhere...

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I look forward to reading this book. Everything the authors say makes perfect sense in light of the difficulties my nephew is experiencing; he is extremely intelligent, but has been labelled by his school and his parents have to fight to get the school to let him learn the same material as his peers. Does anyone remember when teachers thought they were paid to teach rather than judge?

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