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# Learning Gym trains brains; ADD kids can grasp the ABCs

by Jerry Roberts

When youngsters learn in a gym, it's usually to kick, shoot, dodge, run, jump and score. But the Learning Gym allows kids to do all of those things as they apply to mind games, to their behavior and education, to the way they live their lives.

Touting "fitness for the mind" and "brain training," the Learning Gym in Manhattan Beach has functioned as an enabler for students with learning disabilities for a generation, aiding more than 300 children to discover how to learn and communicate better.

The philosophy of the Learning Gym is that the inability to learn is treatable through repetitious exercises and that each person learns differently. The classroom may not provide a suitable environment for certain students. Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD or ADHD with "Hyperactivity" added into the ADD quotient) has become a familiar educational term for a variety of conditions that prevent certain pupils from excelling at academics, perhaps from processing information or retaining what they just heard.

"It depends on the kid," says Dr. Victoria Maxwell, a psychologist and director of the Learning Gym and its attached Structure of Intellect (SOI)

Counseling and Testing Center. "Some kids fly through the process and come for only a couple of months. Other kids come for a couple of years. It depends on how well motivated and willing the kid is to learn."

And it depends on which type of ADD is identified. SOI testing determines which of the six types may be afflicting a child, who is then tracked through processes that train his or her brain to learn faster or more comprehensively. One of the goals of the Learning Gym is to reduce the use of drugs to treat behaviors that have traditionally been connected to ADD.

Only since about 1990 has ADD been viewed as a biological disorder. Dr. Daniel G. Amen, medical director of the Amen Clinic in Fairfield, Calif., has identified six different kinds of ADD by viewing brain scans. These range from classic attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or ADHD, in which the subjects are inattentive, distractible, disorganized, hyperactive, restless and impulsive, to the so-called "Ring of Fire" condition, in which the subjects are angry, irritable, inattentive, hyper-verbal and extremely resistant, tending toward cyclic moodiness and occasion violence.

After the gym's SOI Systems personal

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## MB Learning

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analysis test identifies the type of ADD that the subject seems to have, the specially prescribed exercises erode the subject's inability to process information. If a student has cognitive problems, for instance, he or she has not yet developed the acumen necessary for instructional programs.

Kids with perceptual problems have not yet developed perceptual, auditory or visual skills to assimilate information. Others have sensory integration problems and are not able to integrate their vision with their voice, balance, body awareness and touch.

In some cases, SOI testing can discover that students and even adults are actually gifted intellects, but their learning abilities are disabled, sometimes by vision problems such as jumpy eye movement and tracking difficulties, according to Dr. L. Brian Hersch, a Denver psychiatrist. Barbara Massie of Hawthorne is one parent who is sold on the Learning Gym. Her five-year-old son, Ryan, wasn't completing his kindergarten work on time. He had tested as a fairly intelligent kid, but his behavior was distracting to other schoolmates. A pediatrician tested Ryan positive for ADD and offered solutions, all of which ended in the boy going back to his old ways.

"He then recommended medication as a last resort," Barbara Massie said. "On the way out of the office I noticed an ad for the Learning Gym. Ryan went down for testing and they found two disabilities. His eyes had problems tracking left to right, and he had a hearing problem in which he would think similarly sounding words were the

same, like 'hit' and 'fit.' I put him in the Learning Gym the entire summer. And he was doing well until December, when he wasn't going to the gym, because of some trouble we were having because of Sept. 11 - I had worked for United Airlines. He went right back to his old ways, so I recently put him back in the Learning Gym.

"I have a clear view of what he was like before, during and after," she said. "He's back in the Learning Gym now, and I'm very happy with that. He's now one of the best readers in his class and his math has improved markedly. His concentration level is more on-track when he goes to the gym. And he loves being there. It's hard to make him leave sometimes."

The Learning Gym costs \$35 per session, which are usually scheduled twice a week. Maxwell says that it is 90 percent successful in bringing out previously hidden abilities. It doesn't teach; it treats the causes of learning disabilities with "learning therapy."

The Fast ForWord training programs used at the Learning Gym combine the latest brain research and technology to help students as well as adults improve language and reading skills. They were developed by Scientific Learning of Oakland, Calif.

Based on over twenty-five years of neuroscience research, Scientific Learning's family of training programs uses patented technology to target the language and reading skills widely recognized as the keys to all learning. Each program's interactive exercises integrate proprietary CD-ROM and Internet technology to create an optimal learning environment that adapts to the level of each student, according to the website [Scientificlearning.com](http://Scientificlearning.com) ((888) 665-9707). Patented Web-based tracking tools provide ongoing monitoring of each student's progress. "This is the first program I've seen that cuts to the chase, gets to the core of the problem and provides conditioning for the brain that enables students to make this vital connection from language to reading," said Rhelda Ball, a Houston school principal. The Scientific Learning programs were featured in both Time and Newsweek.

Learning gyms have only caught on in the United States in the past decade. Texas, for instance, replaced most of its special educational courses with learning gyms. It was the first state to establish testing for accountability. Parents and teachers are finding that when special education is inadequate or fails, and that tutoring isn't doing the job, they have to find a solution," Maxwell said. "Torrance Unified School District is a model for other school districts in helping kids with ADD."

Federal law 91-142 mandates that a public school student must fail for two years before he or she can be placed in a special education program. "By that time, their self-esteem is so beaten up that they become resigned to failure," Maxwell said.

The SOI testing assesses determines any pupil's learning style - figural, symbolic or semantic, or a combination

- while it also assesses his or her school-learning capabilities, critical and analytical reasoning, math and reading skills and vision.

A pupil that tends to have "word holes" in sentences may not yet understand the meanings and nuances of certain words. A pupil who has difficulty with perspective will be inhibited in geometry. He or she needs to work on orienting objects in space.

SOI testing was developed during World War II by Dr. Paul Guilford of USC as an alternative to IQ testing. Dr. Mary Meeker, a Guilford student, applied the testing to the field of education in the early 1960s and with her husband, Robert Meeker, developed the SOI model for learning. The Manhattan Beach couple has since moved to Vida, Ore., and Maxwell, Mary's daughter, continues the pioneering couple's work in the South Bay.

While 300 students have gone through the gym, thousands have been tested by the testing center. Most don't require the gym to release them from their learning constraints. The gym's beams, balls and other playground-style objects actually test and track hand-eye coordination and other physical abilities while computer testing programs illustrate the kids' abilities to sense direction, identify shapes, perceive objects and single out similar forms.

Maxwell's gym is allied with the one at Peninsula Montessori in Rancho Palos Verdes, where even students without learning disabilities often enjoy the exercises in the gym. For more information, call 546-8583. "If every kid did the Learning Gym and Fast ForWord, we would eliminate half of the learning disabilities, period," said Maxwell associate David Garcia.  
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