

Learning Styles of Spirited Children

You are probably familiar with the terms “left-brain and right-brain” as they relate to learning. The left brain organizes information and seeks a logical conclusion while the right brain creates ideas and seeks an outcome that feels good. True learning requires a bit of both, but the average school system is overly focused on left-brained methods which leaves a large percentage of children feeling like there is something wrong with them. But rather than asking why the student isn’t grasping the material, shouldn’t we be asking why the method isn’t reaching the child?

We know that no two people are exactly alike, but there are some basic commonalities in personalities and among learning styles. Some people fall on the extreme end of either spectrum, while others may have a more balanced approach to learning in that they can move between the spectrums depending on the outcome desired.

While the brain is far more complex than a division of two hemispheres, research has revealed some very distinctive differences among individuals who are dominantly left-brained (linear learners) and those who are predominantly right-brained (linear learners). We will explore both styles, but the focus is placed on circular learners here because they are spirited and often misunderstood.

I will start by sharing that I am a linear learner. School came pretty easy to me because my brain functioned well within the system. My firstborn, Bryan, was a circular learner. He was also precocious and scary smart. At 3 he could name any dinosaur you showed him...by their scientific name. We read lots of dinosaur books and he seemed to be reading along as he pointed to the labels and recited the names with us. While visiting a museum when he was 4, he promptly informed the desk clerk that the “Pterodactyl” was actually a Pteranodon and proceeded to school him on the difference. It had, in fact, been mislabeled.

When he started school, we couldn’t wait to watch him shine. After all, he was already reading names of dinosaurs, Dick and Jane should be a piece of cake. But it wasn’t. He struggled and we discovered that he wasn’t reading the dinosaur names, but rather memorizing what the words looked like as he matched them to the picture of the dinosaur. This was our first look at circular learning...but we didn’t know it and neither did his teachers.

It was the early nineties at the height of prescribing Ritalin to “fix” kids diagnosed with ADD/ADHD. My husband and I were called into the counselor’s office shortly after Bryan began second grade and were told we were dooming our child to “a life of mediocrity” if we did not put him on Ritalin right away. We struggled with the decision. We wanted him to be successful and saw him struggling, but he had friends who took Ritalin and he was aware of how it changed their personalities and he begged us not to make him take it. He promised he would work harder...and he really tried. He used headphones to block out noise during tests, used colored filters to help his eyes focus better on words, he tried every tool thrown at him...and he continued to struggle.

I was working on my psychology degree and naively thought I could coach him into success with positive guidance and feedback. We sat at the table for HOURS working on math and reading skills. But concepts that my linear brain simply understood were like a foreign language to him. My best efforts to be patient too often spiraled into frustration resulting in tears for him...and then for me as I struggled with the guilt of not being able to help him. There were lots of days when I thought I failed him by not insisting he take the medication that would focus his brain...I will always be grateful I did not.

At about 10 years old Bryan discovered *Harry Potter*. He begged for a hardback copy. At first, I hesitated. This was a child who struggled reading his school assignments and, typical to kids like himself, he was unorganized, shoved papers carelessly into his backpack, and doodled on everything. I suggested that he start with the paperback and if he took care of it, we would get a hardback. But he was persistent...as he often was...and promised he would take care of it. He was true to his word, and he still has the full set of hardback copies on a bookshelf in his own home. He was so proud of his hardback book. He loved the way it felt in his hands, the weight of it, the smell of the pages. He devoured the book so quickly that at first I was convinced he hadn't really read it. It was the last time I doubted his ability to learn anything he set his own mind to (I should have remembered the dinosaurs).

We both made a shift after that. He discovered a love for reading and a renewed confidence in his ability to learn. I became aware of how important it was that the method fit the learner. I started paying closer attention to how his learning differed from my own and began correlating my work with personality styles to research on learning styles. He also learned about personalities and applied it to his teachers. He buckled down in classes with teachers who focused on linear teaching methods (often math and science) and renewed his energy in classes where the teachers allowed more creativity. He learned that if he adjusted himself to fit the class, he could get the outcome he was after. He no longer resisted because he was doing it for his own reason.

I learned so much being Bryan's mom...so when we were finally blessed with another son, Dakota, who was even more spirited than Bryan, I thought I was prepared. Bryan was 14 and such an amazing big brother. But he was off to college by the time Dakota was 4 (and by then had a 1-year-old brother too).

I was a personal development and relationship coach as well as a grief counselor. I had a deep understanding of personalities and was certain I was up for any challenge as Dakota entered school. But I hadn't factored in Bryan's personality difference. Behind his outgoing and creative dominant style (Entertainer for those of you familiar with the CORE Multidimensional Awareness Profile I co-developed) was Commander. He had enough of a fire in his belly to succeed that it gave him his own internal motivation to overcome the challenges circular learning presented in a linear school system once he had the tools to work with. Dakota is an Entertainer/Relator. A double feeler and double circular learner. I was not prepared...but you can be.

Linear and Circular Learning Styles

Linear learners prefer an orderly approach. There is a beginning and an end with various numbers of steps (such as key concepts for learning or completing a task) in between. Learning is most effective for Linear Learners when structured and delivered in sequential “chunks”. One thing builds upon the next until the learning or task is complete. Linear learners tend to be logical, serious, focused, disciplined, efficient, practical, task-oriented, and strive for accuracy. They tend to store information in words and categories rather than images. They are motivated by the goal itself.

This learning style is an effective approach to learning an existing concept beginning to end.



Circular learners prefer a more flexible and holistic approach. They look at the goal, form a central idea, then simultaneously make connections between all the pieces they have. Along the way they ask questions and generate ideas of their own. They prefer efficiency over precision and will look for an easier way to get the same outcome. They are curious learners and want to know how and why things work or happen.

They are easily distracted, so may hear steps 1-3, phase out for 4-5, then reengage at 6. This makes following instructions difficult at times, so feedback listening is important (tell me what I told you).

Circular learners tend to be friendly, emotional, caring, people-oriented, and strive to connect to others. They tend to store information in pictures rather than words. They are motivated by how a situation or outcome will make them or someone they care about feel.

This learning style is an effective approach to problem solving.



Case Study

I work with many families who are raising spirited children. My approach is not to “fix” the child, but rather to provide the parents with tools to help their child thrive. This is a case study of one of those families.

The work I do includes assessing personality styles using the CORE Multidimensional Awareness Profile. Understanding personalities is crucial to understanding learning styles, motivators, demotivators, and stressors. Commanders and Organizers are linear learners. Entertainers and Relators are circular learners.

Their son (age 10 when we started) has a very similar personality to my son Dakota (Entertainer/Relater). His mother was really struggling with his “lack of performance”. She is a first-generation Asian American who grew up in a home that upheld very strict cultural values around discipline, hard work, and education. She worked very hard as a student and while she acknowledges that it was a struggle at times, she managed to do it and doesn’t understand why her son is “failing” so miserably. She believed her son was lazy and just didn’t care (labels spirited children often incur). She said she was “willing to be the bad guy and let her son hate her so that he would be successful when he grows up and then he can seek counseling like she did for his issues.”

That sounds pretty harsh, but she was at the end of her rope and didn’t understand that her own personality (Entertainer/Commander) gave her the drive to push through and she had more of a balance between linear (Commander) and circular (Entertainer) learning. Her heart was in the right place, but her methods were tearing the family apart.

In trying to help this family, I encouraged the mother to stop using fear and criticism as a tactic with her son. It worked for her because she is an E/C who 1) took on the role necessary to gain approval of her parents to satisfy her E, and 2) had C driving her to do her best, to not look foolish in her parent’s eyes, and just to prove she could do it when they told her she wasn’t smart enough.

Her son, on the other hand, is a double feeler (E/R). He doesn’t have the drive of C or the dogged determination of O to propel him toward a goal when there isn’t a reward at the other end. In fact, he was constantly losing rewards that he earned because he got in trouble for something else and that became his punishment. He had come to believe, at 10 years old, that no matter how hard he worked for the rewards, he would inevitably do something that would cause it to be taken away. So why bother.

She was using fear tactics that were causing him to withdraw at times and lash out at others...the more he pushed back the harder she pushed in return.

This is why using fear and inciting stress would never work for her son (or other spirited children:

We are biologically predisposed to either move toward pleasure (pulling in more of what we love) or away from pain (pushing away what is harmful or a waste of time). Because we are bombarded with so much information each day, to learn and retain a new concept effectively we must either attach a pleasure or pain-based emotion to it. Think about the events in your life that you remember most vividly. These events are attached to a significant emotion, either pleasurable or painful.

Fear is a powerful emotion that can motivate some while completely shutting down others. Tests create feelings of fear for most people (fear of failure, ridicule, embarrassment, etc.), which is why they are an effective measure of learning for some and not others.

- Linear learners have an easier time channeling fear to work like adrenaline, fueling them for success. They can process the “danger” that fear represents and formulate a plan to move away from the pain and toward pleasure (a successful outcome). They are good decision-makers and think well under pressure.
- Circular learners tend to become immersed in fear. Their focus is on survival which derails their ability to reason. They tend to shut down or lash out when under pressure. For circular learners, it is helpful to address the fear, then refocus their attention on pleasure. As an example, on a child’s test day, you might plan a special breakfast or treat for that morning (something to get them excited and encourage their success), then a small reward once the test is done (maybe stop for an ice cream on the way home from school or have something fun to do when they get home), followed by a bonus for doing well (this is usually a day or more after taking the test). The importance of this is that it rewards the effort as well as the outcome. For circular learners, this is vital for motivation to learn – especially with concepts that are more difficult.

Strategies shared for their son

The goal was to encourage and grow his natural tendencies while also teaching him some linear skills in a way that he could embrace (he needed to understand how they would serve him – if they felt imposed he would resist). These were strategies addressed directly to his parents:

- People like your son operate on WIIFM – “What’s in it for me.” While it may appear selfish at times, it is the trait that allows people to self-care (which is an important aspect of good self-esteem). And, because they seek out connections with people, pleasing others is also a powerful motivator. If he is resistant to something, help him see why it is important to him or someone he cares about.
- If he is frustrated, ask him to take a breath and calmly tell you how he is feeling. If he can’t articulate it as a feeling, ask him what he is hoping for or trying to avoid. Conversely, if you are feeling frustrated, take a deep breath (deep enough so he notices) and explain to him why you’re frustrated. Give him the opportunity to help you feel better. Something like: “When you don’t bring home your homework, I get worried that you might fall behind again. I sure don’t want next summer to be like the last one. I feel

like the school let us down last year and I need your help to make sure you are staying on track. I get frustrated because it sometimes feels like I care more about your success in school than you do. That may not be true, but it feels that way when you don't bring your papers home like you have been asked to do. Can you try harder to help me with this? Is there anything I can do to make it easier for you?"

- Remember that his senses are on overdrive. He can be overwhelmed by too much stimulation, and yet he needs activity to channel his own energy. He is more sensitive to extremes and his own moods can move from calm to irrational on a dime. He hasn't yet developed the filters that will help him as he matures. What comes up may come out before he thinks it through.
- He needs to know why it is important and how it works. It may take a lot of patience to give him this information rather than insisting he "just do it." Remember to go easy on yourself if you get impatient or angry, especially as you are learning new ways to connect with him. Explaining to him why you felt that way also gives you time to process your own reactions and think about how to do it different the next time. Engage him in the process. Ask him to tell you how he felt when you got frustrated and ask how you might get the result you are after in a way that feels better to him. It will feel very foreign at first...and there will likely be times when you just want to get it done without taking the extra time to analyze feelings...in those moments, you can quickly explain that too: "I'm sorry I yelled at you. I am just really frustrated and I'm sure you are too. How can we get this done faster so we can move on to something we would both rather be doing?"
- What you focus on grows. If the focus is on his deficits, he will lack confidence that he can do better. If the focus is on his strengths, he will have the confidence to try harder.

What Dakota Taught Me

When I was working with the family above, I drew a lot from what I had learned from helping Dakota because their personalities were similar (Dakota was 15 at the time and had acquired many of the skills I shared with them). But I could only see it from my perspective and really wanted his take on learning, so I asked the following questions:

What makes learning difficult?

1. Stress. I feel stress if the person teaching is stressed. Stress is like a tidal wave that pushes me under and makes me feel like I'm drowning in information.
2. Time limits and strict guidelines. I prefer learning to be more like an ocean and less like a river. I want the freedom to move in and out of it in whatever direction I choose to go, rather than having to follow a predetermined path at a speed dictated by the flow of the river.

3. Not understanding why something is important. I feel resistance when people try to force something I don't understand by saying "just do it because I, or the book, said so." I WANT to learn things that are important to me and I am WILLING to learn things that are important to someone I care about or to an outcome I am after.

What makes learning easy?

1. Excitement. I am always engaged if the topic is exciting to me. The teacher can engage me when the topic is exciting to them. If they teach with enthusiasm, it makes me curious to know why they're so excited about it.
2. Flexibility. I like history because everything is a consequence of something else. We can learn from the past or ignore it to create our own as-of-yet-undetermined future. Math, on the other hand, is an individual event with a predetermined outcome. I can tell the story of King Henry VIII a thousand different ways and still be accurate, but $2+3$ is always 5. For me, sequence isn't linear, it is circular – this happens and causes that to happen, which results in this.
3. I like things with motivation – why did they do it, say it, think it? People are limitless while numbers are fixed – numbers have no motivation, they just are.

Profound awareness for a 15-year-old. We had come a long way by that point and I was pulling on many of the lessons I learned along the way. Despite all I had learned with Bryan, there was still a real learning curve with Dakota. Where Bryan welcomed tools to help him focus, Dakota felt it made him look "stupid" so he resisted them. Like Bryan he showed high intelligence very early. He was speaking in full sentences before he was two. His gift for language got him in trouble at times. He wanted to discuss everything...and to have his own opinion on it. Adults often perceived this as disruptive and even disrespectful, though that was rarely his intent. He was just endlessly curious.

Teachers sometimes believed Dakota was lazy because he presented himself with such eloquence and his conversations showed great maturity, but he seemed to lack motivation to do his work. It wasn't that he didn't do it...he did homework every night and then often forgot to turn it in. I can't count the number of zeroes he received for work he completed but forgot to turn in. Written calendars didn't help. Lists were lost. He actually got his first phone as a reward for learning to use notifications and the digital calendar. I also sent him text reminders during the day for important deadlines. That was a game-changer for him.

Even with all I knew about learning styles, it was still challenging at times, particularly with math. Concepts that were simple to my linear brain just seemed to go over his head...in my mind, I knew he was "smarter than that" so I became frustrated. I had to learn that it wasn't about his intelligence. He just processes very differently than I do. And in order for him to

focus, he actually needs distractions at times, where I don't want them at all. For example, while doing math homework that was already pushing past his bedtime, Dakota started cracking jokes. I didn't laugh because I was focused on the work. So he cracked another joke trying to get my attention. This time I was frustrated by the delay and raised my voice telling him to stop cutting up and focus. Fortunately, he knew enough about personalities that he made a keen observation and said, "I crack jokes when I feel stressed and my brain starts to freeze because it helps me relax. And when you laugh it makes me happy, and that gives me energy to work more. If you will interact with me for half a minute, I promise I'll be able to focus better so we can get this done." I tried it his way and it really worked. Yes, it was still frustrating to me...and yes, I would rather just "get it done" without distractions...but I came to realize that doing it "my way" was not helping him learn and it actually made the process even longer. I exercise a little more patience with him than was comfortable for me, and he focused harder and longer than was comfortable for him...and he retained the information much better. When stressed, he would get the concept long enough to finish the homework and would then do a "brain dump" to relieve stress...much of our work was not retained and it reflected on his tests. For him, anchoring information with stress doesn't work. He wants to dump stress. When he can have even a little fun while doing something he doesn't like he anchors the learning to the fun and retains it much more effectively.

Circular learners often have an uncanny ability to "manifest" answers. Dakota could come up with the solution but couldn't show his work. He would get a zero on his homework because he didn't show the work correctly, even though all the answers were correct. Like the "lazy" label, "cheater" is a label that makes the wrong assumptions about right-brained, spirited children. Dakota has a very strong moral compass and being accused of cheating was a huge hot button for him. As much as he struggled with showing his work, it is something he learned to do because the discomfort of being perceived as a cheater was bigger than the discomfort of showing his work.

There are too many lessons to list. I have an entire file of "Dakotaisms" because he is constantly coming up with something unique, funny, or outrageous. Which reminds me of one more label worth noting...circular children are so creative and their imaginations so big, that they are sometimes labeled a "liar". Oh, the stories I could tell about this one. But the important lesson is that their intent is to make people happy by sharing big, colorful stories. "Dakota's World" was ever more fascinating than the real one. This got him in trouble at times when he was younger but translated to becoming an incredible writer and story-teller. Embrace their creativity. Use it as an incentive to learning.

When Dakota struggled with reading in first grade, the counselor called me in to share her "concerns" that Dakota was struggling with reality as well as reading. She showed me a little booklet the kids were reading about children hitting a pinata in order to get the candy inside. The strategy they were using was a classic linear learning model. They asked the children to do a "picture walk" which entailed looking at the pictures and telling the story the way they saw it,

then reading the words that went with the story. She showed me that Dakota had drawn laser beams coming out of the eyes of the pig, seemingly shooting the children. She went on to say that Dakota's story was about a "Pig of Enlightenment" who shot laser beams of truth at aliens who were pretending to be children. The laser beams made them expose their deception so Earth's children could see the truth. I thought it was brilliant...she wasn't pleased. I then asked her if they could reverse the way they were teaching Dakota to read. I told her that if they allowed Dakota to tell the story first it would be bigger and way more interesting than the average child reader and he would have trouble going back to the original story. A linear learner could follow the logic of what each picture intended and attach the proper words to the image. Dakota's circular brain absolutely could not. She said that wasn't how it was done. Fortunately, it was almost Christmas break. I asked them to send home all the readers. Dakota went back to school in two weeks able to read all of them. The teacher was amazed and asked what I did. I told her I did what I had asked them to do previously. I promised Dakota that if he learned to read the words in his readers, that he could tell me his version of the story next. After the first reader I made a huge production of how good his story was (it really was) and he was delighted. He couldn't wait to read the rest.

There were lots of these types of struggles. He had some wonderful teachers, and he had some really bad ones. Some encouraged his creativity, others squashed it. Some welcomed his "fact sharing" and others thought he was a "know-it-all." There were lots of times when I had to be his advocate...to point out the services that he should have been receiving based on his IEP, but some teachers resisted because they thought he was "too smart to need the help" or "too lazy to do it on his own." By high school Dakota had learned to be his own advocate. All the tools we worked on started to turn things around. By his senior year he was taking dual-credit college courses and had a 4.0 GPA. He went on to college and is earning a dual degree in Linguistic Anthropology and Slavic Language (he taught himself Russian so he could enter at college level).

Dakota is a shining example that kids who don't FIT the system can learn to WORK the system. It takes time and patience (lots and lots of patience). It was hard work on both sides...but so worth the effort!

A Final Note About My Youngest Son...a Linear Learner Like His Mama

As much as I adored my two spirited sons, I was incredibly relieved that my youngest, Colton, was a traditional learner like me. While I was helping Dakota every night, Colton rarely needed help and was motivated by his own desire for good grades. He stressed himself out over a low A and quickly learned how to use Power School to track his progress. I never had to remind him to turn in his work and his teachers adored him.

One might think that Dakota would be jealous, but it was actually the other way around. Colton felt like he was just ordinary. Dakota was such a big personality and Colton thought he hung the moon. It was too easy to take for granted how easy Colton was...and how the extra

attention Dakota required might make him feel. Of course, we praised Colton for his accomplishments, but he also saw us jumping up and down for Dakota when he brought home a C. In his mind, his A was not as special as Dakota's C because he didn't have to work very hard to get it.

Hormones are an article in themselves. Dakota had been an openly emotional mess when puberty hit...angry one minute and sobbing the next. But Colton went silent. He pulled inward and lost his confidence as he began to compare himself to Dakota who was just emerging into the best version of himself full of confidence and swagger. Fortunately, we noticed the change and encouraged him to share how he was feeling. It was scary to learn that he had been spiraling toward depression all while keeping up his perfect GPA.

The lesson here is that both styles of learning bring gifts and challenges. Embrace and encourage both. Help circular learners gain linear skills and help linear learners expand their thinking and encourage creativity. Advocate for your children and teach them to advocate for themselves. Communicate openly. Watch for changes in behavior that could signal trouble. Look for the intent rather than focusing on bad behavior. And always be open to learning from them too.

Learn more about Gina Morgan and her approach to coaching at www.coachgina.com.