

# Helping Children Learn For Life

Anne Marie Ferris talks about the learning-skills programme that's transforming youngsters' prospects in Ireland

By Caitlin Collins



**B**ased in Wexford, NLP Trainer Anne Marie Ferris is a former teacher who specialises in working with children, and also adults, who have specific learning difficulties or emotional or cognitive problems that interfere with their ability to learn in the traditional manner.

As Anne Marie points out: 'Learning is part of life for all of us, and so is school. Everyone has struggled at some stage with their experience of learning, and many children find school a challenge.'

For teachers, the practicalities of coping with large classes in schools can make it difficult to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach. Anne Marie's Learning4Life™ programme aims to work specifically with the individual. 'I believe that everyone is unique, and that everyone has great potential,' she explains. 'We need to find out how an individual thinks, how he constructs his view of the world, or how her past experience affects her beliefs about her capabilities, so we can offer each child the skills and strategies for learning that he or she needs. All sorts of experiences – from identifiable traumas to everyday life changes – can interfere with how someone approaches learning, so we need to look further than the simple imparting of a set of defined skills.'

It's for just this reason that Anne Marie's programme is flexible and multi-sensory, using visual, auditory and kinaesthetic approaches. It includes elements of NLP, hypnosis, and timeline work, and of course years of experience of finding solutions to the array of difficulties encountered by her clients, both children and adults. 'Empowerment, flexibility, and sense of worth are key concepts,' says Anne Marie; 'We need to empower the student to be able to learn and adapt within a rapidly changing world, and to appreciate his or her valuable contribution to society.'

## Is your child struggling?

Anne Marie has come up with a set of questions that could help to identify a child who might be struggling at school, including:

- Do you find it hard to concentrate?
- Do you find attending school difficult?
- Do you dread being asked to read aloud?
- Is your spelling poor?
- Is your writing hard to read?
- Do you find it hard to get the sense of what you've read?
- Do you lack self-confidence?



Surely most of us can say that we've experienced some or even all of the above? 'Of course,' says Anne Marie, 'but while successful learners are able to strengthen their visual processing abilities and develop confidence in their progress, people with persisting problems miss these steps and as embarrassment and fear increase so their problems get worse. So we need to help people change their limiting beliefs about their abilities and give them strategies that work.' Anne Marie remembers one mum's tears of joy as she declared of her teenage son, 'I knew he was clever at other things, but when it came to his school-work he just couldn't seem to get it before – and now he can!'

Anne Marie finds two labels to be particularly commonly attached to the various problems presented by the children she works with: dyslexia and AD(H)D.

## Dyslexia

Herself the mother of a child with dyslexia, Anne Marie is well-placed to help others with this problem. The term means 'difficulty with words', and the condition tends to run in families. Children don't usually grow out of it, although the problem may become less apparent in adulthood as people learn how to compensate in other ways, including getting good at avoiding difficult situations.

'Dyslexia has nothing to do with low IQ or backwardness,' emphasises Anne Marie.

'But it can lead to difficulties with learning, which contribute to lack of confidence, low self-esteem, behavioural problems and social difficulties. And although the evidence shows that it's not associated with intelligence, family background or teaching practices, it can involve a lot of blame, as parents blame the teachers, teachers blame the families, and everyone blames the children, especially the children themselves!'

Surprisingly widespread, affecting some 10% of the population in the UK and Ireland, dyslexia may manifest as a variety of problems, including: delayed and poor reading and spelling; left / right confusion and directional difficulties; problems with logic, sequence, or time awareness; poor writing and motor skills.

Here are just two of the practical, positive ways Anne Marie recommends to address the problem. Remember, learning is easier when it's fun...

The first exercise gets your brain into gear for visual processing. It shifts the eyes to a different position from the position they take when we're stuck in our feelings. It can be done before any reading or writing task; it can also restore alertness and even relieve headaches.

- Keeping your head straight, move your eyes in an arc, from left to right and back again.

- Repeat at least seven times, and notice the change in how you feel...

Practising the second exercise will help to integrate left/right brain hemisphere coordination and auditory and kinaesthetic processing. Do you remember the old Ready Brek ad? With one hand pat the top of your head while saying, 'I'm just great!' Then with the other hand rub your tummy clockwise and say, 'I love (your favourite food, or whatever you like). Now do both these actions simultaneously while saying each phrase. What happens? Then swap hands and have a good laugh!

### Attention Deficit / Hyperactivity Disorder – AD(H)D

Attention Deficit, which may or may not include Hyperactivity, puts enormous demands on parents, teachers, and of course the affected children. Symptoms can include hyperactivity, forgetfulness, lack of organisation, impulsiveness, procrastination, distractibility, and lack of self-confidence, and children with AD(H)D receive such negative feedback from other people that they begin to doubt their capabilities, perceive themselves as being 'different' or 'weird', and start to devalue school and learning, which of course has a knock-on effect in the rest of their lives.

As someone who experiences many of the diagnostic symptoms much of the time, often varying according to circumstances, I have doubts about the AD label. Is it the pathologizing of the normal energy of children erupting due to changes in the way of bringing up children? More chillingly, is it a contrivance of the drug industry? Children used to be running about playing outside; nowadays they're sitting indoors watching TV and playing computer games. If I lived like that, I'd go nuts. If I were a child I'm sure I'd become unmanageable and be deemed hyperactive.

Anne Marie says, 'We need to ask ourselves, do we really want to hand over responsibility

for our children's behaviour to the drug companies? Currently, conventional medicine offers drug treatment, specifically Ritalin and amphetamines. And although studies of amphetamine use for AD(H)D show some improvement in overt behaviour and cognitive skills, would you like to subject your child to the risk of the acknowledged side-effects of tics, hallucinations, abdominal pains and loss of appetite? We need to treat the whole child and not just the presenting behavioural symptoms. Here are wonderfully creative minds operating out of control! We need to reconnect the children with the kinaesthetics of their emotions and teach them how to control their minds so they can start to enjoy learning. Then, as their behaviour improves, they receive more positive feedback from others and the downward spiral switches into a virtuous circle.'

A student's emotional and mental state has a huge impact on his or her ability to learn. Anne Marie recommends Alpha State exercises and Eye Tracking exercises

combined with Time Line Therapy for helping children diagnosed with AD(H)D. Try this quick Alpha State exercise and notice the difference in how you feel.

## Empowerment, flexibility and a sense of worth are key concepts

- Pick a spot above eye level and look up for a few seconds. Notice the things you can see in your peripheral vision.
- Now return your eyes to normal eye level and continue to be aware of your peripheral vision while you resume your activities.

I'm glad that attitudes in education are changing, and programmes like this are becoming available. When I was a child, what I learned in school and how I learned it (the memory of reciting multiplication tables can still induce nausea) had little relevance to the rest of my life. As Anne Marie puts it, learning should be for life, not just for school, and her programme is based on this belief. 'It's not just about solving difficulties,' she says. 'It's about empowerment. The changes we make change the way people perceive themselves. If you see yourself as a successful learner, your confidence improves as new behaviours become stronger and more lasting. This in turn empowers everything you do, including studies, friendships, course choices, career choices and relationships – so this really is learning for life.' ●

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