

Lecture will address a model of children's learning development



By Tyra Damm

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Jake Greenspan carries a significant legacy.

His father, child development expert Dr. Stanley Greenspan, died last year. Dr. Greenspan wrote parenting books based on practice and research. Among a long list of accomplishments, he established the “floor time” method for working with and nurturing children with developmental disorders such as [autism](#).

Jake Greenspan is co-founder and co-director of The Floortime Center in Bethesda, Md., working with families to identify learning differences and to help children overcome those challenges. He employs the diagnostic and therapeutic techniques honed by his father.

Greenspan will be in Dallas next week to speak about his father's model of evaluating a child's individual learning profile. I spoke with him this week in advance of his visit. Here are excerpts.

Your lecture is titled “The Learning Tree.” What is the tree concept?

My father wrote a book called *The Learning Tree*. He outlined the three main pieces of his model.

The roots are hardwired through the different senses. That wiring adjusts over time.

The trunk of the tree is what differentiates my dad in his field. Children progress from an emotional and cognitive standpoint. It's not just a natural process that happens automatically.

And the output is the branches and leaves — reading comprehension, math skills, abstract reasoning and logic, socialization.

How does a tree grow? It's through its relationships with its environment. The sun, water, air. The child grows through relationships.

How early in a child's life can learning challenges be discovered?

You can start seeing it in the first nine months of life, if they're hitting the correct milestones or not. By age 3 or 4, many symptoms manifest themselves more quickly.

What are the milestones?

It depends on who the parents are listening to.

There are a lot of pediatricians who take surface behaviors: Is the child pointing, walking? They're important, but there are other important components. Did the child crawl and cruise as well? Or, is the child talking at the right time? But first, were they communicating physically? Are they taking you by the hand, pointing at the toy, grabbing the toy, handing it to you? Are they getting into long sequences of back-and-forth communication?

Are learning differences more prevalent now or are they diagnosed more often?

Both. Diagnostic criteria for all differences are broadening. There are more symptoms on the checklist, so many more children are falling under these categories.

Yet I do see a lot of children who may not get identified. We want identifications. What troubles me is then what's done about it? One of the first steps is to medicate vs. therapy. Doctors don't know what can happen to a young brain with long-term medications.

My experience is very few children have true ADHD. Most children have limited attention. They attend to what motivates them. Most children with attention differences have underlying sensory processing issues.

It's good if a doctor can identify a problem but bad if they just medicate.

How do you help equip parents to be advocates for their children?

We try to educate parents as much as possible. The best advocate is an educated one. What are the goals? What options are out there? We try to give parents info over time so they feel confident in knowing options in schools, other clinics, the systems around them.

What are public schools doing right in an effort to help children with differences?

They're doing their best to put a lot of funding for services for kids who qualify. They are trying to support kids with learning challenges. They are trying to provide support, one-on-one services. They are trying to educate teachers more about these differences. More and more teachers are becoming familiar with sensory processing.

What could public schools do better?

One of the challenges of public schools is their own set of goals: getting a child to thrive in the classroom. There should be a larger set of developmental goals for the child.

So, a child who can't sit down and attend to tasks — look at the overall sensory profile, postural control, ability to do fine motor tasks so they can develop long-term success.

Tyra Damm is a Briefing columnist. Email her at tyradamm@gmail.com.

SMU's Annette Caldwell Simmons School of Education and Human Development hosts Jake Greenspan, presenting "The Learning Tree: Helping Children Overcome Learning Challenges" at 6 p.m. Thursday in SMU's Simmons Hall, 3131 University Blvd., Dallas. Free, but reservations required: paddington@smu.edu or 214-768-4844.