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Dr. Marshall Raskind on Specific Success Attributes Among Individuals with Learning Disabilities



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longitudinal studies tracing LD across the lifespan.

This is question 2 of a 4-part series on the findings of the Frostig Center's longitudinal study, "Patterns of Change and Predictors of Success in Individuals with LD." The following is an edited transcript of an interview conducted by SchwabLearning.org's Ann Christen with Dr. Raskind, on October 8, 2002.

SchwabLearning.org Asks:

Dr. Raskind, can you tell us about the specific success attributes you identified in your research among individuals with learning disabilities?

Dr. Raskind answers:

Let me start with **self-awareness**. The successful individuals in our study were very aware of their strengths and their weaknesses, whether they were in academic areas like reading and math, or in non-academic areas like their emotional states, or in their physical functioning and coordination. Also included were various academic-related things like attention and organization. So, successful people were very aware of their strengths and limitations. They were very open and specific about these. They could discuss them very easily. But probably one of the key elements regarding self-awareness was the successful individual's ability to do what we call "compartmentalize" their disability. What that really means is that they are able to see their difficulties as only one aspect of themselves. They were not overly defined by their difficulties. I have a quote that is an example of this from a woman in our study, about 33 years old. She said, "You know, everybody comes with a package. And, yeah, there

are things that I am good at and things that I am not so good at. Some of my limitations are reading and writing, but boy, when it comes to putting things together, reading plans, and chasing down problems, those are some talents, some skills that I was born with. I carved a different path and my whole life has been that way."

I think that's a pretty good example of being able to say, "Yes, I have this difficulty, but it's not going to limit me or really keep me down. I see it as only one part of myself." It's one thing to be aware of your problems; it's another thing to be able to accept them, and that's another thing that we found with our successful individuals — they were able to do both.

They really came to a level of acceptance of their problems, their strengths, and their weaknesses, and were able to integrate those ideas and feelings into themselves. Now, another interesting area has to do with the individuals' strengths and weaknesses and how they matched those strengths and weaknesses to the activities they pursued in their life. I think employment is a good example. We often call this "niche picking."

The idea here is that successful individuals with learning disabilities are able to recognize their strengths and limitations and find the jobs and employment situations that best fit their strengths and limitations. So, for example, you have an individual who has exceptional skills in woodworking. They might find a successful career in cabinetmaking, rather than knowing that they also have great difficulties with reading and writing and trying to be a copy editor.

It seems kind of obvious, but it was amazing how many times we saw individuals who were not doing that well who had great difficulty in making that match. Along the same lines, you might find someone with very poor reading and writing skills, but excellent oral language skills, who decides to pursue a career in sales, rather than a job that really requires them do a lot of reading and writing. And, again, the unsuccessful individuals had great difficulty in niche picking, or trying to make this match.

The next success attribute is **proactivity**. And you may remember that word. I think it was quite in vogue in the business community. But what we refer to as proactivity has to do with being actively engaged in the world, politically, economically,

Continued on page 2



In This Issue

Message from the President.....	2
Editorial.....	3
Overcoming This Hurdle-Achieving The Gift.....	4
Networking Through Liasons.....	4

Regional News.....	6
Help Available For Struggling Readers.....	6
Dyslexia Resources For Parents.....	7
TN IDA Introduction of Board.....	Pull-out

Message from the President

by Martie Wood, Interim President
TN Branch of the IDA

MOMENTUM

I am humbled by the quality and warmth of the people in our organization who are supporting and trusting me to lead our branch. I have huge shoes to fill. We started off my term as interim president with a two-day working retreat at the Scarritt Bennett Center in Nashville. Attendance was great, the site and the food were wonderful, and we worked very hard. We accomplished a great deal and worked together beautifully. Our goals and schedules established, we began to do the practical work. Our goals for the next term are:

1. To produce the fourth TN IDA Annual Conference, to be called the *Second Annual RISE Conference*, on April 17, 2004 at the Currey Ingram Academy in Brentwood, TN
2. To complete the election process.
3. To encourage and enable regional parent support groups.
4. To facilitate mentoring avenues between adults with learning differences and young people still struggling.
5. To disseminate information and knowledge through one-hour presentations to community, professional, and parent groups.
6. To expand reciprocal communication between groups involved with our branch of the IDA and the focus of our work.
7. To increase and promote high-quality professional development opportunities.

The opportunity is available to acknowledge the overlap and increase the exchange of information from all of the groups served under the IDA umbrella. Speech/Language Pathologists, Pediatricians, School Psychologists, Psychiatrists, Clinical Psychologists, General Educators, Special Educators, Teacher Education Institutions, Paraprofessionals, Adult Literacy Teachers, Administrators from Principals to State Superintendents, Neurologists, Behavioral and Biological Researchers, Educational Policy-Makers, Community and Corporate Foundations, Community Service Organizations, and Governmental Grant Services all have a part in building the most functional path to improve our instructional delivery systems. Of course, this passion originates with and radiates from the numerous individuals who have dyslexia and related disorders and their parents and families. They are the foundation and obviously the purpose.

In this newsletter, you will find the list of groups and liaisons who have volunteered to work with us to increase the flow of information.

You will also find the ballot of nominated officers and board members. I am motivated by the many positive responses we received. Our membership must now vote. Two methods are provided for convenience: a.) Vote on the ballot in this newsletter and mail it to the address provided. OR, b.) Go to our website (www.tn-interdys.org) and submit it electronically. Voting must be completed by the deadline listed on the ballot.

I find myself quite excited about the momentum our branch is experiencing, and grateful for both the trust placed in my ability to lead us on and the support that will enable me to do it.

Continued from page 1

and socially involved in community activities. This is one of the things that the successful individuals with learning disabilities were able to do. They were really a part of a number of communities. And with this involvement came the idea that they could control their own destiny, that they could affect the outcome of their lives. They were active players in their own lives, as opposed to many unsuccessful individuals who really responded to events, were passive in their lives, and were more "victims."

And along with that, they were also individuals who would tend to blame other people for the problems that they were having, unlike the successful individuals, who assumed responsibility for their actions and the outcomes of their actions.

Again, these are attributes and behaviors and attitudes that are important for anyone, for all children, but especially for kids with LD.

The next attribute that we found in our study has to do with — I often think of the Eveready Energizer™ Bunny that just keeps on going and going and going — **perseverance**. They don't give up. Now, I do have to say that even those individuals who were eventually termed "unsuccessful" — and I want to be really careful with the term "unsuccessful" because, remember, these were ratings that we made in our research based on a multidimensional view of success that, in other settings, environments, or countries, might not be seen as unsuccessful. But, at least for our purposes, the unsuccessful individuals, while they also persevered, would say things like, "I'm not a quitter. I'll never give up." The successful individuals, on the other hand, demonstrated an additional ability of knowing when to quit.

I'm somehow struck by how the successful individuals also knew when they needed to shift gears. While they generally didn't give up on an overall goal, they knew when to back up a little bit or change the path a little bit to get there.

The unsuccessful individuals, on the other hand, would just keep beating their heads against the wall and not recognize when it was time to reevaluate the strategies or, in some cases, the goal itself. The successful individuals would say things like, "I have failed many times. I am not a failure. I have learned to succeed from my failure." There was this idea that they could fail, pick themselves up, and get going again. They weren't overly defeated, whereas some of the unsuccessful kids really were overwhelmed by adversity and, in many cases, finally just gave up or kept beating their heads against the wall.

Goal setting was another one of the success attributes. The successful individual set very specific yet flexible goals. Again the idea here is that they could adjust goals to fit certain circumstances and situations. These goals were in such areas as employment and family, spiritual goals, and personal development. And in many cases, they were set, at least tentatively, in adolescence. They also developed a strategy for reaching their goals and really understood the step-by-step process for attaining those goals. I have a quote from about a 30-year-old man, who made this statement, "I always look at every move. Like this particular move doing the video as a stepping stone for the next project. That's how I'm looking at it. As I said, the area I really want to move into is to direct." This person had a very clear picture of where he wanted to go, and how to get there.

They have to have something in mind, they have to be flexible in terms of how they're going to reach that goal, and they

Continued on page 3



Continued from page 2

have to have an appreciation and understanding of the step-by-step process for reaching that goal. A lot of children with learning disabilities need support and help to be able to do that.

The next success attribute has to do with the **presence and use of effective support systems**. And I think what I'll do is finish a little bit with the goal setting because it's a nice transition. The successful individuals also had very realistic and attainable goals. And the individuals who often supported them also had set realistic and attainable goals for them. So the people who were around them and helping to guide them also had a sense of realism. And it's a little bit scary when that sense of realism is not there. We had one individual — and I don't mean to make light of it because there's really a sobering side to it as well — but I had one individual who came in and said, "Marshall, I finally figured out what I'm going to do." And I said, "What are you going to do?" He said, "I'm going to be a professional golfer. I just watched this great golf game and I saw the winner win all this money, and this is what I'm going to dedicate my life to." And I said, "Oh, gee, how long have you been golfing?" And he said, "Well, I haven't started yet."

So the whole idea was that he was very intrigued with this goal but was not very realistic about it. And that does concern us.

Both the successful and the unsuccessful individuals receive support from others. We saw that successful individuals eventually move away from that support and they were able to decrease their dependence on others while that was not something that the unsuccessful individuals could do. Many of them had difficulty cutting that cord and remained highly dependent on others.

The successful individuals were more able to do that, starting at an earlier age, as well. And the successful kids also actively sought support from other individuals. They didn't simply wait around hoping that somebody would eventually help them, which is something that many of the unsuccessful individuals didn't do. They just waited passively.

The last success attribute has to do with **emotional coping strategies**. And we know that learning disabilities can, in the course of a lifetime, produce a lot of frustration and difficulties. In some cases it may be so significant, the stress with living with a learning disability, that an individual develops anxiety and even depression.

What we saw in the successful individuals was that they had developed effective means of reducing and coping with the stress, and frustration and other emotional aspects of having a learning disability. There appeared to be three key components in this process. They were aware of the situations that triggered the stress. Secondly, they also had an awareness of the developing stress that had started building up. And thirdly, they had access to, even if it was an internal repertoire of coping strategies.

So, to give you a more specific example, we had one individual in our study who experienced anxiety attacks. And she knew — so this is the first component here — that reading aloud in a group was one of the key triggers producing anxiety. She also then was aware — which has to do with the recognition of the developing stress, that was our second component — that as she started getting more and more stressed or more and more anxious, she would start feeling herself breathing more and more rapidly and maybe ultimately even hyperventilating. But the key here is that she also had developed strategies. In this case, she had been working on a number of deep breathing strategies that

helped calm her down and reduce her anxiety. So those three things — in terms of reducing that stress and frustration — were really paramount to her success. Now again, that's just one example. There are many things that the successful individuals did as far as the development of coping strategies. In some cases, it was seeking counseling. It was asserting oneself, utilizing peer support, planning ahead for difficult situations. In some cases, it was just a matter of getting their feelings out, or sharing those feelings with members of their family or peer group.

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EDITORIAL by Eileen Card

As editor of the Volunteer Voice, I have the privilege of adding articles that I think might be of interest or informative to you as the audience. I enjoy frequently perusing the Schwab Learning website (www.schwablearning.org) and find it to be a helpful tool for use with the parents and students whom I work with on a daily basis. Dr. Marshall Raskind's article on *Success Attributes* is of particular interest, as it not only validates the importance of academics for children with learning differences but also bridges the gap between what is being taught in school and what parents could be doing at home to support the successful outcome of their child's education and subsequent adult experience.

As the Head of a private school for students with learning differences, I am always searching for the missing element that will help "fine tune" the students into successful adults. Through research, Dr. Raskind pinpointed six specific success attributes that teachers and parents should be aware of and working on. The series of articles brought to mind a book that 7th- and 8th-grade students with learning differences had written last year, *Getting Over It*. The book begins with Dr. Raskind's first attribute, "self-awareness", an intense description of their academic weaknesses and how these affect not only their learning but also their social lives in an academic setting. The young authors appear to have reached a level of acceptance of their strengths and weaknesses. The next step is to use this knowledge as a guideline in pursuing goals the rest of their lives.

Dr. Raskind's second listed attribute is "proactivity" which means to be "actively engaged in the world, politically, economically and socially in community activities". He describes proactive students as being part of a number of communities and through their involvement come to control their own destiny and the outcome of others. In the second half of the book *Getting Over It*, the student authors make suggestions for teachers and peers on how to relate to and help students with learning differences. What a "proactive" approach to making their current world a comfortable place!

Attribute number three is "perseverance", which includes the ability to continue but not give up, and the knowledge to know when to shift gears or change directions. As I watched the young authors develop their book, there were many times they felt they should give up. It was then that their teacher would be there to guide and encourage them to continue. They didn't give up, but persevered through all of the obstacles that confronted them.

Continued on page 5