



## Goal Setting for Children with Learning Disabilities: Your Role is Important

By: Dale S. Brown (2008)

In January, many people set their goals. The holiday season is over. It's back to school, back to work, and back to family routines. Teachers plan their next year's classes while parent's think about their family and what they want for each member. Employees set work plans and annual goals.

Children should also be encouraged to set goals for learning, personal growth, and their future. When children learn to set goals and reach them, they can visualize their future, make good choices, and make their dreams come true. The Frostig Center did twenty years of research on what makes people with learning disabilities successful as adults: goal setting was one of six success attributes.

Unfortunately, many children with learning disabilities and Attention Deficit Disorder find goal setting challenging. They often have **Executive Function Disorder**—a miswiring of the brain which makes it hard for them to plan ahead, to start and stop what they wish to do, and to monitor their behavior. Some children get distracted from any goal they set. To make matters more complicated, the school system and society sets goals for them—such as getting good grades and performing well on standardized tests—that challenge them in their area of disability. When they do not receive proper accommodation, they get discouraged and lose confidence.

Here are some ways to help your children, students, clients, and people with learning disabilities set their own goals and reach them.

### Ask them about their dreams and desires

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Listen to them. Ask open ended questions in response to their thoughts. If the ideas seem outlandish or unrealistic, don't squelch them, just shape them. For example, suppose you have a student who has flunked every science class he's tried and lacks mathematical ability. He tells you he wants to be a doctor. You don't think that's possible. In that case you might talk about the many ways they could heal others — being a physician's assistant, a nurse, a coach, or a nutritionist. Their desire to be a doctor could give them the determination they need to do their math.

### Encourage them to set goals that relate directly to their desire

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Their own desire will then fuel their motivation. **Jack Horner**, a world-renowned paleontologist, was fascinated by dinosaurs. In his autobiography, he talks about how he was unsuccessful in school subjects, but excelled in science projects. "My goal in life was simple," he explained in his **Intellectual Autobiography**, "I wanted to be a dinosaur paleontologist." He met his goal. As an adult, he discovered the world's largest Tyrannosaurus Rex and advised director Steven Spielberg about the science in the Jurassic Park movies.

## Help them to work around their disabilities as they work towards their goals

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Jack, a middle school student with ADD wrote **an essay** which won the 2007 Breaking Barriers Essay Contest. This essay describes focus techniques that he used to meet his academic goals. He keeps a journal to write down his homework and when things are due. He also challenges himself to meet short-term deadlines — such as completing a quiz by a particular time. Goals should be SMART: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-bound. If you set goals yourself, talk about how you set them and what you do to meet them.

## Teach and model perseverance

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People with learning disabilities often face barriers that others do not. This means perseverance is particularly important. Perseverance is another one of the six success attributes extolled by the Frostig Center.

Jim Jones learned to twirl a basketball on his finger and do some tricks that other kids thought were cool. This lit a fire under him, and in **The Positive Side of Learning Disabilities**, he says, "I practiced so much, I wore the skin off my pointer finger and it would bleed. In eighth grade, I spun two basketballs. In ninth grade, I spun three, and by tenth I could spin five basketballs. I was asked to show off my skills for small groups. One day I got a call. The man asked if I would like to perform half-time for the Cleveland Cavaliers NBA game." At the age of 16, he did ten performances. He is now a well-known motivational speaker discussing his experience as a dyslexic.

## Teach children to handle setbacks and failures

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Tell them that mistakes are opportunities to learn and that the road to success often involves many detours. The important thing is to try again. **Life Success for Students with Learning Disabilities: A Parent's Guide** explains, "Many persons with learning disabilities show great perseverance and keep following their chosen path despite difficulties. They often describe themselves in such terms as 'I am not a quitter' and 'I never give up.' However, successful individuals demonstrate an important ability — knowing when to quit."

Successful people with learning disabilities find new ways of achieving their goals, ways that are often significantly unique. For example **Jack Horner** wanted a job in a museum, but had no degree. While working as a truck driver, he wrote letters to every museum in the English-speaking world and asked if they had "any jobs open for anyone ranging from a technician to a director." He received three responses and was selected by Princeton University's Natural History Museum where he worked for seven years.

Here are some specific ways that you can encourage your child or student set goals and persist in accomplishing them:

- Notice when they are working towards their goals and praise them for it. Be particularly alert to the goals they themselves select.
- Link their schoolwork to the goals they want for themselves.
- Praise their work process as well as the product. They deserve praise for persisting, especially when the results are not in. For example, your child or student keeps on working on phonics, long past the

time when other children have learned it. Notice and encourage his persistence even if he is still behind grade level.

- When they succeed, ask, "How did you do it?" Listen intently to what they tell you. Have them speak of their own success. This helps them understand what works for them. It teaches them to rely on themselves for reinforcement rather than waiting for an authority figure to praise them. Teach them to compliment themselves, to give themselves positive reinforcement so they can motivate themselves when nobody else is.

## **Inspire your students and children to overcome their learning disabilities and reach their dreams**

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Help them reach their inner hero. Many people with learning disabilities attribute their success to a teacher, parent, neighbor, or other adult who believed in them when they did not believe in themselves.

Perhaps you can set a new goal to help people with learning disabilities reach their goals. You can be the one who helps them identify their dream, eliminate the obstacles, and make it come true.

For information about Executive Function Disorder, go to **Executive Function Fact Sheet**

### **About the author**

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**Dale S. Brown** is the Senior Manager of LD OnLine. She wrote this article based on her experience as a leader in the self-help movement of people with learning disabilities. She has written five published books and won the Ten Outstanding Young Americans Award for her work on learning disabilities.

### **References**

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A definition and description of Executive Function, and references, can be found on the **Encyclopedia of Mental Disorders website**.

Brown, Dale S. (January 2008). Goal Setting for Children with Learning Disabilities; Your Role is Important. LD OnLine.

<http://www.ldonline.org/article/21026?theme=print>

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