

## Myth of a Quick Fix

Eight-year-old Dana struggles with reading. Her mom, Kathy, learns through a friend that Jump Into Reading, a commercial afterschool reading program, has helped her own son enormously. Although the program is pricey, and it would mean that Kathy has to leave work early two days a week, she decides to enroll her daughter.

But first she sets up a meeting with the director and asks him some tough questions: What experts have endorsed the program? Has any independent research been done on Jump into Reading? What kind of results should she expect after a few months?

When the director promises that Dana will be "cured" and reading at grade level within just a few months, Kathy decides to wait and do some more sleuthing before making the sacrifices that the program will demand. She stifles her impulse to just give the program a try. A year and a half of struggles have made her desperate to try something — anything — different.

In the information age, being a skeptical consumer has become a necessary part of parenting a child with a learning disability (LD). Given the complexity of LD and the growing array of quick fix "cures" that are becoming available, consumer learning has become a hot topic. Kathy may very well decide to try Jump into Reading because it's worked for a trusted friend. But the possible downsides, that Dana could experience yet another failure, coupled with the additional burden on Kathy, make her realize that it's important to be as sure as possible that this method has good chance of helping her daughter.

### Being a Wise Consumer

In April 2000, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) released research results on the instructional methods that work best when teaching reading. Since then, words like "research" and "science" have shown up in names and descriptions of all sorts of LD therapies and educational tools, whether or not the products have third-party research proving their effectiveness.

Third-party research, or independent research, follows scientific principles that can be replicated and repeated. Professionals who aren't tied to the organization or the individuals who developed the product or theory lead the research.

Many organizations that claim their product's usefulness was shown through scientific methods actually have done most of the "research" themselves. You should be aware that terms like "scientific," "research," and "proven" may say more about the company's savvy marketing strategy than true worth of the program.

Even LD therapies that are research-based don't necessarily work for every child, and this makes evaluation even more complicated. Learning disabilities are widely misunderstood and vary from child to child. Although some programs have a higher success rate than others, not one quality, research-based program has been found to work for all kids. One size — even a gold standard one — simply doesn't fit all.

### Looking at the Downside of a Program

Out of desperation, some parents choose to leave the traditional system, putting their faith in unproven methods that promise cures and rapid improvement in learning. Some of these programs are extremely well funded and visible in the press, in advertising, and on the Internet. Others are quite small. Some are very expensive; others involve nothing more than the purchase of a book or game.

You might think that if these unproven therapies or programs aren't physically harming your child, then there's no risk to trying them. But as Kathy finally realized with Dana, precious time and energy that could have been spent on more promising interventions is lost. Most important, kids with LD have lots of experience with failure and poor self-esteem. Not only does controversial therapy have the potential to break down precious self-esteem further, it's likely to make her feel that she — and the skills and strengths she does have — aren't important.

### **Making a Decision about a Program**

Difficult as it may be to accept, learning difficulties are a lifelong issue. Children with LD do succeed in learning and life, but they will always have differences. There are no cures. Things just aren't that simple.

As a parent, your best bet is to keep up on independent research, and to know your child's strengths, challenges, and learning style. Be ready to ask hard questions before buying any program or enrolling your child.

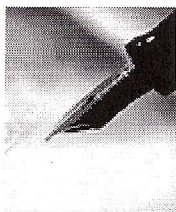
#### **Questions to Ask Yourself**

- What is the standard or conventional treatment?
- How is this program different or better?
- What do experts in the field say about the program?
- Who recommended the program? (Independent evaluator? Program vendor? TV advertisement?)
- Do I think that this program will meet the unique needs of my child?
- Are there risks, side effects, or downsides to this program?
- Are the product's claims unreasonable or too good to be true?
- Does the product promise a cure, quick fix, or radical improvement?

#### **Questions to Ask the Program or Professional**

- What can I expect my child to gain from your program?
- How do you measure progress?
- Has any independent research been done on this program? If so, where can I review it?
- What are the program's success rates? (Don't be satisfied with just a few "testimonials"; ask for numbers and references.)
- What are the total costs of the program?
- How much time will be involved? (Length of sessions? Number of sessions per week? How many weeks, months, years?)
- After children complete this program, how well do they retain the gains they've achieved?
- What is the refund or guarantee policy?

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#### **About the Contributors**

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### **Other Resources**

#### **Websites**

National Resource Center on AD/HD  
Complementary and Alternative Medicine [for AD/HD]  
<http://www.help4adhd.org/en/treatment/complementary/WWK6>