

## Learning Styles – by Debra Bell

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*How do kids learn best? That's the question I set out to answer when taking my education degree. But after working with kids more than twenty years, it's clear to me the question should be: how does this kid learn best. That's one thing that sold me on home schooling – the opportunity to design a program uniquely cued to how each of my kids is wired to learn.*

*You've probably been exposed to teaching along these lines – all of them have value to whatever extent they help you recognize your child's preferred method of learning. I want to cover here the model developed by Dr. Keith Golay in his book [Learning Patterns and Temperament Styles](#). I've taken the model he developed for a classroom setting and applied it to home schooling. I devoted an entire chapter to the subject in my book [The Ultimate Guide to Homeschooling](#). Cathy Duffy has also used this model to evaluate curricula in her book [100 Top Picks for Homeschool Curriculum](#). You'll want to look there and in my book for additional resource recommendations.*

*There are four key categories of learners, Dr. Golay concludes. I've renamed them here for our purposes: The active learner, the routine learner, the focused learner and the global learner.*

### **The Active Learner**

This kid is controlled by his impulses. Doing is his thing. Forethought is not. He lives for the moment. Any learning that occurs is an unintentional by-product of his actions. He wants to touch, manipulate, construct and destroy. While it is not in the research, I'm sure there is a high correlation between the active learner and the kid with at least one broken bone by age eight.

It goes without saying, this guy is the least suited for the traditional classroom, and formal learning experiences. He won't sit still for lectures, repetition or drill. Material requiring concentration or seatwork quickly frustrates him. He has a short attention span, and does not organize nor plan ahead. He cannot sustain a project or an assignment over an extended period of time. He wants to be unrestrained by structure, routine or authority. He loves games and enjoys being in a group but is competitive and often takes charge. Other kids enjoy him for his antics and sense of fun. In a highly structured environment with strong authority he can quickly become a behavior problem, causing disruptions and acting defiantly.

Here we have Dr. Dobson's strong-willed child, and among teachers, psychologists and exhausted parents, he is quickly labeled hyperactive and often medicated. Without consideration for this child's learning style, he will likely become a dropout.

That's the bad news. Here's the good.

This little guy is just the one you need to get the job done when the situation calls for quick wits and resourcefulness. He often has the ability to act swiftly with precision. He's Huck Finn improvising a plan that saves Jim's life, or Jim Lovell patching together an air filter that rescues the Apollo 13 mission. He's Jacques Cousteau, Henry Ford, Wilbur Wright or Daniel Boone, taking risks and opening new frontiers.

He's adept at manipulating, constructing and performing. In an environment that allows for his interests, he excels in areas requiring invention, physical dexterity, resourcefulness, and courage. He will respond well to any subject presented in such a way that he is free to move and act.

### **Program Suggestions For the Active Learner**

First, this kid needs strong but patient parenting. His inability to control his impulses must be brought under the loving command of your authority. Make this your number one priority. Remember this is more important than any academics you may or may not get done each day.

Second, set up an environment that is quiet and clear of distractions. This will help your active learner to stay focused longer on his schoolwork. Establish a daily routine that delays the activities and subjects he likes best until the afternoon as a reward for staying on task during the morning. Give him short breaks after each subject is completed. Have him do something physical during this time – go outside, exercise or complete a daily chore. Spice up the routine regularly with variety: field trips, special projects or cooperative classes. Introduce an element of competition where possible; for example use computer programs, such as *Math Blaster* (Davidson), which have a game-like format and reward players for improving their scores in skill areas.

Be tolerant of your active learner's need to move around, lie on the floor or fidget while studying. Forcing him to sit still when it isn't necessary means all his focus will be on this command, and he won't be able to concentrate on the subject at hand. Be flexible. Tolerate the nonessential stuff. Fight the battles that really matter.

Set short, achievable goals and immediately reward good attitudes and acceptable work. Incentive charts, stickers or special treats can all be motivational.

When looking for resources and curriculum, choose as many as possible that are activity-based. Your active learner needs to physically handle the material he's learning and to manipulate it in a variety of contexts to understand it. My youngest daughter is an active learner – I've used manipulatives, such as [Cuisenaire](#) rods for math. We've tied art projects and map-making to history and geography lessons. For science, I've incorporated field trips and experiments using the books by Janice Van Cleave. I've also found that content-based coloring books are a quick and simple way to reinforce what my active learner is reading about.

Finally, think sports. This learner is frequently gifted in areas that require physical dexterity, primarily athletics. I've seen many active learners thrive in an organized sports program. This is an acceptable release of their energy and it is often a place where they can excel and feel good about their achievements; it gives them a much needed focus and teaches them to control their impulsive behavior because they are highly motivated to play.

Don't despair with your active learner. I know their energy can often be exhausting for harried homeschool moms with lots of other kids as well. Designing a program that honors their learning style will do a great deal to manage their behavior and bring out the best in them. I know many older active learners who have grown up to be passionate in their pursuit of the Lord and who are real leaders among their peers – God has His purposes in mind in their unique design.

### **The Routine Learner**

While the active learner can be every teacher's challenge, this learner is every teacher's joy. Here we have the cooperative child who is motivated by a desire to win the approval of adults. She is naturally responsible, studious and nurturing. In a group of children she is the one earnestly listening to the teacher or helping the active learner to find his place on the page.

She prefers a quiet, well-organized and structured environment. I call her the routine learner because she desires order, consistency and clearly delineated responsibilities. Her primary motivation is to understand and meet others' expectations. She will ask for clarification frequently in an effort to avoid mistakes. Hearing lots of questions from the routine learner is a good indicator that she is stressed and insecure about the learning environment.

This learner assimilates information by identifying and memorizing facts and procedures. She needs material presented in a sequential, step-by-step manner. She is most comfortable with traditional teaching methods: written assignments, repetition, drill, textbooks, and workbook learning. While she works hard to master sub skills, her weakness is in seeing the big picture – understanding the principles, concepts and abstractions. This is the child who can decode every word on the page, but is not able to answer questions concerning the story's plot or characters' motivations. She will correctly punctuate all the sentences in her language arts book, but then not recognize when a semi-colon is needed in her own writing.

The routine learner does not do well if she is expected to handle open-ended assignments or to choose her own activities. She does not like role-playing, estimating, predicting or other exercises that require spontaneity, creativity or extrapolation.

### **Program Suggestions – For the Routine Learner**

This learner needs well-organized, sequential lessons presented in incremental steps. Look for resources with clear directions and standards of evaluations. Make sure your expectations are clearly articulated as you launch into a subject of study.

Material developed for the classroom can easily be adapted for this kind of learner. However, look at a sample lesson. How many concepts are presented per lesson? Does the math workbook jump around between concepts or move from simple illustrations to complex problems too quickly. This learner is the one who will have the most difficulty switching gears. She likes to travel the well-worn rut in the road.

The routine learner will naturally divide big projects into smaller steps and segment out subjects for study. This is an effective tool for accomplishing goals, but make sure she doesn't lose sight of the larger picture. She may have memorized the dates of the major Civil War battles, states of the Union and Confederacy, etc., but does she understand how economics, politics, scientific inventions and religious movements converged to create this cataclysmic moment of our history?

Don't just settle for correct answers on a multiple choice test; essay tests for the older routine learner are a much better method for assessing her understanding of the larger concepts. For younger routine learners, have them orally paraphrase their reading for you as another method for assessing and reinforcing their understanding of material.

It is easy because of her compliant nature to just settle for routine and traditional materials for this learner. But it is not in her best interest, she needs to learn to invent and take risks. Reward her for creativity and trying new ventures: food, sports, travel, an academic competition, a creative story. Build open-ended assignments into your program – ones that require her to make choices and develop her own ideas. Teach her to handle these in a step-by-step fashion.

This learner has an innate desire to be helpful. Teaching other children is an effective strategy. It will appeal to her nurturing nature and has the added plus of reinforcing her own learning in the areas she is presenting to the group.

### **The Focused Learner**

Good news. The focused learner will learn despite you! Bad news. He's going to exhaust you with his intensity and questions. This learner has an insatiable appetite for knowledge. He wants to be able to understand, explain, predict and control realities. He seeks to uncover principles and to use them in structuring his cognitive and intellectual world. The absent-minded professor, Mr. Spock and the mad scientist are all caricatures of this personality.

Here are the indicators that you have one growing in your home: The focused learner loves problem solving, research, experimentation and intellectual inquiry. He is a creative thinker and chooses research and investigation as a leisure activity. He will focus on one task for long periods of time and can tune out all other distractions (or even all other responsibilities.)

One mom of a focused learner was perplexed by her son's habit of curling up for the evening with a volume of the Encyclopedia Britannica. Another focused learner I know had an extensive rock and fossil collection categorized and labeled in a large area of his basement by the time he was eight.

This learner has a serious nature and is happy that way. He finds great self-satisfaction in his own achievements and doesn't need the approval from others as the Routine Learner does. His greatest difficulties lie in accepting his own limitations. He will often become frustrated if he cannot succeed in solving a problem or attaining his goals. He also neglects subjects and responsibilities outside his narrow frame of interest (i.e. cleaning his bedroom). He will need help and encouragement from you in keeping his shortcomings in perspective. And he will need outside accountability to insure all responsibilities eventually are completed with an acceptable level of competency.

This learner is very objective and analytical in his decision-making and has a difficult time expressing emotions or understanding others' emotional responses to situations. He typically relates to his peers in an instructional, not personal, manner. For this reason, he is often the odd man out socially.

At one point in my teaching career, I developed and taught an honors English program for gifted and highly motivated students. I am reminded here of George, a remarkably intelligent student but one with little interest in my classes, which predominantly involved discussing in a subjective way the literature we were studying. What were the ideas and opinions the kids had formulated while reading the work? How did they see these ideas influencing their lives? Every day we would discuss such things, just for the sake of sharing our reactions. Well, this just wasn't for George and others like him. The focused learner values facts and empirical knowledge, not knowledge that is personal in nature.

Probably the most rapport I ever had with George came when I asked him to teach me to play chess. (I asked because I was about to marry Kermit, who loves chess. This should have been a big clue... guess what kind of learner I married!)

### **Program Suggestions – For the Focused Learner**

This student can be satisfied with materials created for classroom use, if you must go that route, but don't hand him inferior stuff. He doesn't need to be entertained, but he needs to be challenged. And he doesn't want to be talked down to. Make sure the activities and assignments do more than just measure memorization of material.

You will often find the focused learner does not want to write responses out or record all the steps used to solve a math or science problem. Unless you can show him why these requirements are a valuable use of his time, especially when the answers are immediately obvious to him, don't expect him to ever see this as more than busy work. (If you come up with a good reason, let me know as I would agree with the Focused Learner.)

Don't hesitate to let him jump several levels ahead in a subject area of great interest and strength. My friend Susan's son, Jacob, was intensely focused in math and computer science while home schooling.

He scored a perfect 5 on the Advanced Placement Calculus Exam in 9th grade and an 800 on the math section of his college boards in 10th. He placed in national and international programming and mathematics competitions in high school. (He's now in a computer science program at an elite college.) This was only possible because his parents let him work with advanced math years earlier than traditionally accepted. He was free to whiz through lessons or skip entire sections until he hit his level of competency. And they allowed him to devote hours to programming, web design, and software development; and give short shift to areas (i.e. the humanities) that were of less importance to him.

Think mentors. This type of learner often doesn't enjoy working in groups or on teams unless others are as focused as he is. But he does respect and enjoy adult mentors with expertise in his areas of interest. And often the adult finds it quite rewarding to work with a young person who is motivated and enthusiastic. My good friend Cindy had a son intensely interested in video and film beginning in 6th grade. When Daniel reached high school, Cindy arranged (through countless hours and phone calls.) two apprenticing experiences for him. These proved critical in developing his skills and confirming his desire to pursue a career in this field. He's now studying cinematography at one of the top schools in the country.

While a tutor may seem a big step for an elementary student, participation in an organization or club for his interest is another way to cultivate informal mentoring. I know of several home school students who joined hobbyist clubs before their teens. Even though it was unusual, the adults readily accepted them once they saw their seriousness and focused interest. My daughter Kayte has been the junior member of a quilt guild for several years now and a number of women are mentoring her. They find her enthusiasm and appreciation very rewarding (and as this intense interest is quite outside her mother's talents it got me off the hook in terms of teaching her.)

Finally, help this learner develop his interpersonal skills if they are weak. Serving in children's ministry at church or volunteering at a local service organization might work well. As with each learner, it is important that we as parents design a program that allows each child to cultivate his gifts and talents, while at the same time addressing strategically the areas of weakness in character and skill -- all for the ultimate purpose of laying a sure foundation for fulfilling each one's unique calling in the Lord.

### **The Global Learner**

In contrast with the focused learner, the global learner has a wide breadth of interests, often finding it difficult to narrow her pursuits to a manageable number of directions. This learner has the longest entry in the yearbook and keeps her parents hopping as they try to keep track of all the social engagements she has scheduled. She is visionary and thinks about the future; but unlike the focused learner who thinks about the possibilities of principles applied to, say, problem-solving, the global learner focuses on the possibilities in people. She is fascinated by others' beliefs and attitudes: what they think, what they want, how they feel, how they respond.

She enjoys learning about ideas and values and tends to look at herself more subjectively than objectively. She is the student most interested in searching for the significance of things and personalizing their meaning. She is motivated to make a difference in the world, to search for her unique contribution in history.

The global learner is creative and flexible, but not detail-oriented or technical. Rather, this learner will act on hunches and impressions to form broad conclusions. This is the kid who takes a quick look at his math homework and says, "Oh, I know how to do this," then proceeds to fill out the whole thing incorrectly.

While this learner often reads and talks early, she is typically a poor speller and quite disorganized.

Global learners in general are high-achievers and do well academically. But often they set high standards for themselves. Their creations and work are an extension of themselves and are strongly tied to their sense of self-worth. Therefore, failure or rejection of their work is often interpreted as failure or rejection of themselves.

The global learner loves functioning in a group, especially when that group is her audience. She is a communicator and performer. She needs to be known, recognized and acknowledged by others, especially her teacher. Yet she demands individuality and autonomy and the opportunity to act and express herself creatively. My daughter Kayte, for instance, has a tendency to turn everything into a creative project. Now that she takes co-op classes, she's had to learn to follow the teachers' directions – especially in science where she has learned the hard way that creativity is not a substitute for correct answers.

The global learner does not show the competitive nature of the active learner in a group. Friendship and cooperation are important to her. She empathizes strongly with others and does not do well in a competitive environment where ruthlessness and conflict are uncontrolled. She is usually well liked and sought after by her peers and enjoyed by adults.

The global learner typically gravitates toward the language arts, performing arts such as music and drama, psychology, counseling, the ministry or social services.

### **Program Suggestions – For the Global Learner**

This type of learner does best with an individualized and personalized approach to her education. She will be interactive and enthusiastic as long as there are opportunities for her input and creative responses. Thus a discussion group will be more motivating than a lecture, and a project more than a test.

Because of her interest in people, choose resources that focus on how individuals or people groups have been impacted by the areas of study. Read about the scientists behind the theories or how inventions changed people's lives. In history, biographies and historical fiction will have great appeal. The Guides to Famous Men Of... (Greece, Rome, etc) from Greenleaf Press are a good example of what works well.

Because she thinks globally, a unit study approach that integrates subjects such as science, history and literature around a common theme (Japanese culture for instance), will appeal to her interest in understanding how events, ideas and inventions affect the people of that time and place.

Think groups. Co-ops and field trips will become the focal point for most of the global learners studies. Our home school program has always included lots of co-operative activities because I and two of my children share many of the characteristics of a global learner. My son Gabe in particular likes to have lots of people around. His first response to any suggested activity is "who else can we invite along?"

My typical strategy for tackling a tough subject or one that holds little interest is to organize a group. In the past, we've been a part of writing clubs, science classes, geography bees and math competitions – all to get my kids motivated to study subjects they weren't necessarily motivated to learn.

This learner will need your help in learning to pay attention to details. She is often forgetful and careless in her errors. I know I have this flaw—I was a horrible speller in school. In fact, even when I taught English in public school my colleagues would often come in and correct my misspellings on the blackboard! I've taken steps to minimize my errors by always using a spell checker and a personal organizers to keep track of my commitments and appointments. Though my husband has pretty much given up on getting me to balance the checkbook.

I've helped my kids to overcome these tendencies as well with organizational tools, responsibility charts and editing programs on the computer.

**Where does learning style theory conflict with a Christian worldview?**

*Learning style theory does not take into account the biblical view of the nature of children, i.e. they have a sinful nature. I don't want folks to mistakenly conclude that I am asking parents to accommodate the sinful tendencies in our kids. The weaknesses of each type of learner are frequently rooted in sin and we need to help strengthen these areas. Use learning style theory to dwell with your children in an understanding way. Gently with grace, systematically and incrementally help the active learner control his impulses, or the routine learner to take risks and root their insecurities in the sufficiency of Christ, or the focused learner to be more aware of the needs of others around him, or the global learner to be less interested in being the center of attention and more interested in pointing others to the glories of God.*

Read more about learning styles in Debra Bell's classic book, [The Ultimate Guide to Homeschooling](#)