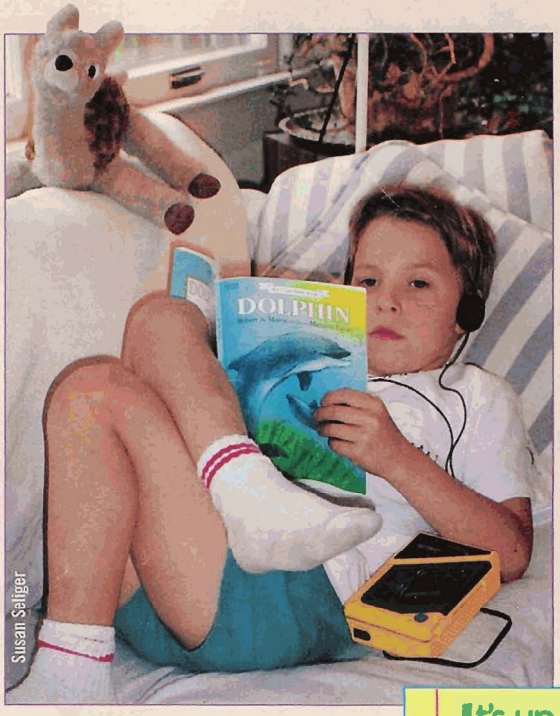
FINDING THE SMART PART IN EVERY CHILD

The "three R's" aren't the only measure of intelligence. Perhaps your little Einstein is actually "music smart" or "body smart" By Marge Kennedy



Susan Saliger

There's a quiet revolution taking place in school systems around the country. Its premise? All children are smart, and the job of teachers and parents is to help kids find the style of learning that lets their unique natural intelligence shine through.

The teachers in these systems are putting the theory of multiple intelligences (MI) into practice. The MI theory, developed by Howard Gardner and his colleagues at Harvard University, moved into the mainstream with the publication of the book *7 Kinds of Smart* (Plume), by Thomas Armstrong. Advocates of MI challenge traditional notions of intelligence as well as tests that claim to rate intelligence. They point out that traditional teaching and testing focus only on two of the seven kinds of intelligence people possess—language and logic skills. So kids who don't learn in a style that relies on language and logic are labeled deficient.

According to Armstrong, it's the teaching methods, not the kids, that are faulty. "In traditional education, we try to remake children to get them to learn in our way. In fact, we need to remake the way we teach so that it fits the kids," he explains. "Only when we recognize that different kids learn in different ways—and that all ways of learning are okay—are we going to be truly in the business of education," he adds.

It's up to parents and teachers to discover the learning style that allows each child's abilities to shine

SMART WAYS KIDS LEARN

As the title of Armstrong's book suggests, there are seven styles of learning—seven distinct intelligences—that students bring with them to the task of learning. Verbal abilities and logic skills, which make up the traditional "three R's: reading, writing, and arithmetic," account for just two of these intelligences and are what Armstrong calls "word smart" and "logic smart." The five other intelligences, according to MI researchers, are equally important, and to ignore them is to risk that children end up working against their own intelligence rather than with it. So, the question for teachers and parents is this: How do we match children's learning styles to what is being taught? Let's look at the ways kids learn and some ideas about how to direct them:

- **Word Smart.** Most teaching today is geared to the expectation that kids are word smart, meaning they absorb information by listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Parents of these kids need only encourage them to keep up with their assignments.
- **Logic Smart.** This too follows traditional teaching lines, using number facts and scientific principles, as well as observation and experimentation. Kids who are logic smart respond well to questions starting with, "What if...." Parents might also suggest that these kids draw diagrams and devise other analytical props.
- **Picture Smart.** These kids can understand so much more when they visualize what they are learning, be it a math concept or a history lesson. Give your picture-smart child plenty of visual demonstrations, from simple homemade charts to museum visits, and ask her to

FINDING THE SMART PART IN EVERY CHILD *continued*

Which smarts come naturally to your child? Whatever they are, use them as a springboard to help him learn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draw as often as possible with her studies.

● **Music Smart.** You'll find that background music doesn't distract these kids; it helps them absorb their studies! Information presented melodically—whether in ditties or even rap songs—hits home with music-smart kids. Try clapping out anything that can be put to rhythm—times tables, perhaps?—and watch this child "get" it.

● **Body Smart.** The child who suddenly catches on to today's lesson as she walks home from school probably has body smarts. She also needs plenty of hands-on opportunities for learning through performing in skits and other physical experiences. Be sure these kids have breaks to stretch and move throughout the day to keep their learning focus sharp.

● **People Smart.** Group projects, which require kids to compare notes, discuss, and decide, are ideal routes to learning for people-smart kids. They are very sociable, and learning as part of a group rates high for them.

● **Self Smart.** Ask the self-smart child how a situation would feel to him and he'll grasp the lesson immediately. This child is often accused of daydreaming when, in fact, he is absorbing his lessons by personalizing them. What would it have been like to be a Civil War soldier or an explorer at the North Pole?

All kids have each of these learning styles to some degree, but obviously in greatly varying strengths. To learn most readily, students naturally tend to draw upon one or more of their stronger styles. Armstrong notes, too, that a learner's preferred style this year may be supplanted by another next year. "Toddlers are body smart," he says as an example. "They learn by touching, feeling, and doing. As kids grow and change, other strengths emerge." Culture too plays a part in which strengths may flourish and which may go underground. "Almost all cultures pass on knowledge musically from one generation to the next," Armstrong observes. In our culture, kids learn their ABC's through song. As kids move along the school path, we use music less and less as a teaching device. "That's sad for all children," says Armstrong, "but for some kids, it becomes a real tragedy."

PUTTING MI TO WORK

Fortunately, putting multiple-intelligence ideas into the educational system doesn't call for a complete overhaul. "Incorporating MI theory into the classroom requires a shift in attitude," Armstrong explains. "With MI we work from kids' strengths, rather than trying to compensate for weaknesses." It's not necessary, MI supporters point out, to teach every new concept in a way that draws on each learning style. A history lesson, for example, might draw on word, picture, people, and self smarts, while a math concept might be facilitated by calling on logic and body smarts. "Over the course of the day, all children should be able to bring their unique balance of learning styles into play," adds Thomas Hoerr, principal of the New City School in St. Louis, which has incorporated MI into its curriculum.

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

The parents' role in this, suggests Armstrong, is to become a "cooperative advocate" for their kids at school. For your picture-smart child, as an example, you might say to the teacher, "I know my child really learns by drawing. Are there ways to let him use drawing in his math work?" If the reaction is negative, provide your child the opportunities to explore learning using his particular smarts at home.

One last warning: Armstrong is concerned that MI could become another exercise in labeling. "Tagging a child an artistic learner or any of the other ones defeats the purpose of MI," he stresses. "Our goal is to broaden, not limit, each learner's potential. Let children use their special gifts, but also encourage them to explore all of the intelligences. That's the road to discovery." ★