

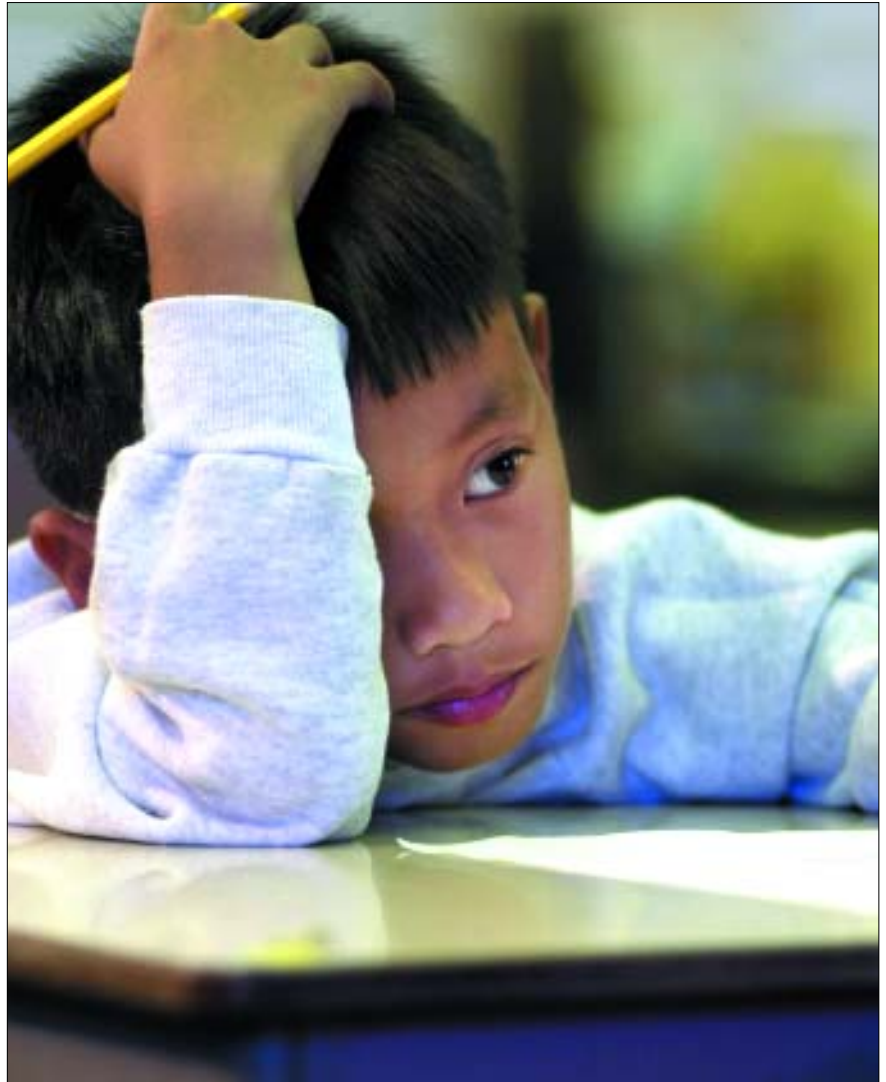
When it comes to the way kids learn, one size definitely doesn't fit all.

# How to Read Your Child's Mind

I've always felt lucky to be an adoptive parent—and not just because of our great fortune in being matched with our wonderful daughter. Another reason: I think I have fewer preconceived notions about our daughter than I might if she were mine by birth.

My husband and I know our genes are not her genes. We try to honor and support her unique strengths rather than despair that she's not a chip off the old block where, say, math is concerned. In understanding how our daughter thinks and how to help her learn, perhaps this has given us a leg up. And guess what? Top learning specialists say we are on the right track.

My friend Suzanne Weissman's situation was a bit trickier. Her second daughter, Grace, now 11, had some learning difficulties in first and second grade. "Grace had trouble paying attention and said she was bored," explains Weissman, who lives with her family in New York City. "Her teachers reported



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# Dr. Levine's 8 Learning Systems & Your Child

*What to Look For*

*If This is a Strength*

*If This is a Weakness*

<p><b>1 Attention Control:</b> The system that dictates focus, alertness, planning and completion of tasks.</p>	<p>Does your child concentrate when reading, playing a video game, playing sports? Is she engaged in classroom learning?</p>	<p>Your child should practice behaviors that take advantage of her concentration, such as listening to music while studying or reading.</p>	<p>Your child should repeat instructions back to herself; use a timer or stopwatch to stay with a task; go to bed earlier.</p>
<p><b>2 Memory:</b> After a child understands an idea, this system helps him store the information and retrieve it.</p>	<p>How well does your child memorize and retain what he learns in school?</p>	<p>Your child should study right before bedtime, when memory consolidates best; underline, highlight, and say ideas out loud while studying.</p>	<p>Ask your child to write down steps before solving a problem; picture things mentally; write down, diagram, or say facts out loud while memorizing.</p>
<p><b>3 Language:</b> The way a child uses words, orally and in writing, understands what is said, and reads.</p>	<p>Does your child express herself well? Can she explain things thoughtfully? Does she write her thoughts clearly?</p>	<p>As a family, have meaningful, idea-filled discussions; communicate in complete sentences, play word games, talk about things that are interesting.</p>	<p>Encourage your child to read, write, and talk about topics he loves; tell stories and describe experiences, even if this is difficult for him.</p>
<p><b>4 Spatial Ordering:</b> Enables your child to organize information in visual patterns, to recognize shapes and patterns.</p>	<p>Is your child organized when he does homework? Does he have trouble using scissors or sketching shapes?</p>	<p>Help your child capitalize on spatial strengths through dance, sports, or art, all of which require spatial ability.</p>	<p>Help your child organize his space. Talk through spatial relations: "I put that on the top shelf" or "The pentagon has five sides."</p>
<p><b>5 Sequential Ordering:</b> Helps your child see the steps in solving a problem, retain the order of tasks, follow directions, manage time.</p>	<p>Does your child understand the passage of time and how to plan for it? Can she follow multi-step instructions? Can she remember a short list of things to do and carry them out in order?</p>	<p>Your child should play or make music (a promoter of sequential ordering) and work on multi-stage projects.</p>	<p>Together, start with short lists of things to do and gradually lengthen them; make schedules for homework, errands, vacations. Ask your child to write down directions in school.</p>
<p><b>6 Motor Skills:</b> Your child rides a bike, plays sport, or dances using large-motor skills; she writes or draws using small-motor skills.</p>	<p>How is your child doing with cursive writing? Is he graceful or clumsy? Does he excel at a sport or struggle with drawing or writing?</p>	<p>Encourage your child in sports, dance, art and/or musical-instrument lessons, emphasizing that these are for enjoyment as well as challenge.</p>	<p>Practice forming letters. Have your child use the computer for writing and art assignments and focus on just one sport (or opt for no sports).</p>
<p><b>7 Higher Thinking:</b> Helps your child solve problems, think critically, reason abstractly and creatively, and figure out answers that are not obvious.</p>	<p>Is your child quick to think up ideas for the science fair? Does she wonder what happens in her book after the story ends? Or is she academically sound but struggling to see past the facts to the bigger ideas?</p>	<p>Help your child follow his intuitive mental and creative drives, be they science, cooking, comedy, collecting, drawing, etc.</p>	<p>Try brainstorming to spur imagination and creative thought.</p>
<p><b>8 Social Thinking:</b> The ability to make and sustain friendships, relate to others, work in teams, and address conflicts. Some argue that this is the most important learning system.</p>	<p>Does your child get along with his peers? Does he have some close friendships? Can he relate to adults? Can he work out problems with his friends?</p>	<p>Encourage your child to enjoy successful peer interaction, but also help him remember to be an individual and feel good when being independent.</p>	<p>Let your child use you as a sounding board when she has social challenges. Talk about social challenges <i>you</i> experience and solve at work.</p>

that she didn't participate in class, while Grace said it was simply more interesting to look out the window. I couldn't help but worry that there was something wrong." The Weissmans had Grace tested and learned that she had auditory processing delays, which affected her ability to screen out background sounds and to pay attention.

What Weissman knows now—and wishes she'd understood better then—is that her daughter's learning was well within the "normal" range. Simply put, different children process information in different ways; each has his or her own style of learning.

This simple yet powerful assumption is at the heart of the groundbreaking approach of Mel Levine, M.D., a professor of pediatrics and director of the Clinical Center for Study of Development and Learning at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. Dr. Levine asserts that all children learn in different ways and the more parents recognize their child's individual learning patterns, the more we can support their growing minds over time. "Adoptive parents' advantage is compelling," he says. "They are always asking, 'Who is this kid?' and, 'What does it mean to know my child?' Every parent should think this way."

That's the message Dr. Levine is spreading as founder and co-chair of a nonprofit learning institute, All Kinds of Minds. His mission to help children succeed, combined with years of research, have resulted in a blueprint for understanding the ways people learn and a method for helping children make the most of their learning style or "learning profile," as Dr. Levine calls it.

"If I had known of Dr. Levine's research when Grace was younger, I could have suggested strategies to her teachers—or perhaps looked for a school

## Try this at home!

**These activities can help strengthen your child's capabilities in each of the eight systems of learning:**

**Attention Control:** When you know what holds your child's attention—be it reading, playing a video game, or playing sports—help her feel good about those things.

**Memory:** Practice memory builders: Ask, "What's the capital of Idaho?" Purposefully repeat instructions to bolster short-term memory.

**Language:** Children need to be encouraged to express themselves beyond kidspeak (*yeah, OK, stuff, whatever, sure*). Have conversations at the dinner table. Let your child see you read. Play family word games. Encourage her to talk and write about things that interest her.

**Spatial Ordering:** Help him get his workspace in order before he does homework. Encourage activities such as dance or sports or art (all of which require spatial ability).

**Sequential Ordering:** Sit down together on Sunday night and plan the week ahead. Have her wear a watch to observe time passing.

**Motor:** If his body doesn't seem to do what he wants it to, let your child skip sports.

**Higher Thinking:** Have lengthy, probing conversations to encourage her higher thinking instincts. Try brainstorming about an assignment or activity to spur imagination and creative thought.

**Social Thinking:** Even as you encourage your child to be a friend, to get along, to resolve conflicts, and to enjoy the company of others, stress that it's good to be one's own person and realize that peers are not everything in life.

with smaller class sizes and lower noise levels," says Weissman.

## Eight Ways of Learning

The key to understanding your child's mind is to know something about how the brain works. Research has shown that the brain is a vast toolbox of neurodevelopmental functions. Dr. Levine says that these neurological functions, which cause us to learn and apply what we learn, can be sorted into eight systems (see chart on facing page). Each system controls an area of information

processing, but all need to work together for learning to happen.

A child may be stronger in some of these areas than others, but the big news is that these eight learning systems are not programmed for a lifetime. Your child may be good at some things and not at others when she is five, but by the time she is eight, her strengths and weaknesses may have shifted. So you'll want to keep a constant eye on the way your child performs where each of these systems is concerned. "Parents are on the observational front lines," says Dr. Levine. "Understanding these learning systems gives them the background to watch and then advocate for their kids."

By understanding all eight areas of learning and how they reveal themselves, you can tune in to your child's weaknesses as well as her strengths. You can find ways to strengthen problem areas, and help your child understand that she's excelling in other respects. By understanding your child's strengths, you can help her use them to work around weaker areas.

Overall, you need to remember that whatever your child may be going through, she is a work in progress. "These systems can change in their capacities over time," say Dr. Levine. "They can level off, but they can also grow in their effectiveness." And that's something to watch for.

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**to** learn more about the way kids learn, go to [www.allkindsofminds.org](http://www.allkindsofminds.org), as well as Dr. Levine's books, *A MIND AT A TIME* and *THE MYTH OF LAZINESS*, available in the AF Bookstore at [www.adoptivefamilies.com/books.php](http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/books.php).