

## Physical Activity Key to Children's Learning to Read

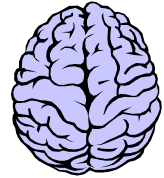
V.1 Visual Processing – Tracking and Reading

### Parent notices reading problems with child in first grade

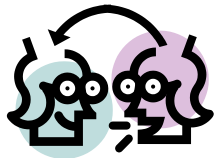


As a physical education and health specialist for a children's hospital, Mary was already interested in the connection between movement and learning even before concerns about her son, Rob, brought her to Options Center for Health and Education in Peoria Heights.

She had seen advertisements for Brain Gym<sup>®</sup>, a series of movements used to develop balance between the left and right hemispheres of the brain, but staying busy with her work, ironically, kept her from exploring the technique further. When she had a child, however, her interest peaked.



Rob had speech delays, not speaking until he was 3 1/2 years old. But that was nothing serious, says Mary, because he had worked himself out of it and was doing fine. He was a young five when it came time to decide if he should go to kindergarten, and after some consideration, she and her husband sent him, and he did well.



Her decision to go to Options was really more of a case of prevention than intervention, she says. Mary just wanted to help Rob prepare himself for first grade. Motor delay wasn't a big concern, but she was afraid with the start of school, that might change. She also wanted to work on skills that would help make learning fun for Rob.

Personally and professionally, both Rob's parents are physically active, and both were fundamentally aware of the connection between movement and learning. So choosing to enroll Rob in Brain Gym<sup>®</sup> classes was a logical step for them in his preparation for grade school. She learned about Options' programs through her work.

When Rob was evaluated, Options found weakness in his visual skills, particularly in tracking, and noticed the balance between the hemispheres of his brain was off, says Mary, so it was difficult to process information on both sides of his brain, she notes. He was also easily distracted and wasn't getting work done.

"I was being educated as well as him," says Mary.

Rob didn't have a problem doing the exercises, and even made them fun. According to Helen Cox, Director of Options, Rob enjoys finding new ways to do the "cross crawl," one of the exercises which allows the person to cross the midline between the right and left sides of the brain. One of the easiest forms of Cross Crawls is to tap the right hand to the left knee and then left hand to right knee.

Mary believes first grade would have caused some struggle for Rob had he not been enrolled at Options. But he did well, and Mary sees the experience as a way in which the school, she as a parent, and Rob could work together for the good of the child.

Rob started passing along the information to his younger brother, teaching him some of the exercises at home, says Mary. He had some tools he could work with, she notes, which leads to independence for him.

Helen also suggested vitamins and minerals that helped Rob with his attention span and overall health, says Mary. Options provided an integrated program for Rob, which included food and nutrition, she notes.

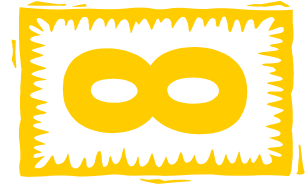
"Her approach to healthy living" helped Rob himself become more aware



of healthy eating habits, the importance of drinking water and avoiding sugar, she says. It reinforces what they as parents are trying to teach their children, "...knowledge modeling in this day and age is sometimes very difficult."

Mary has spread the word about Options' programs to colleagues through her job and to friends, she said. She wants them to "...know there are other avenues of learning," she says.

"Helen is very helpful in discussing the root of the problem and pinpointing how it can be solved," says Mary.



### **Abby, 11-years old –**

Summer school can often feel like a chore or even a punishment to children who need the extra boost to make the transition from one grade to another.

"Many kids hate school -- it's too anxiety producing -- and live for the summer," says Helen Cox, Director of Options Center, Peoria Heights. "The irony is that kids need to keep learning through the summer."

Helen Cox believes educators should offer stress-free learning opportunities throughout the year, but especially during the summer. Teaching the foundation skills -- like thinking and studying -- can help reduce the anxiety associated with learning, she says.

One Options' client, 11-year old Abby, says she is taking classes in Brain Gym<sup>®</sup> for just that reason. Abby says she had trouble with math at the beginning of the year and had problems "understanding stuff." "Sometimes it would confuse me and stress me out," she says.



Abby has taken Whole Brain and Body Integration and Thinking Skills classes. "I like the Lazy-8's best," she says, "and the Double-Doodles."

Lazy 8's and Double Doodles are exercises which train the eyes to work together to better track and read. These exercises are designed to get Abby's right and left brain hemispheres working together. She says she can now draw the Lazy 8's with her left hand, although she is predominantly right-handed, which shows her ability to cross the mid-line and use both eyes in tracking has improved.



Abby does the Brain Gym<sup>®</sup> exercises every morning and evening after school and has noted the difference in her grades as well as her feelings about school.

"I like going because it helps me learn things," she says, adding the sessions help her learn things "to make me believe in myself."

***If you would like to communicate with Options,  
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