Helping Visual-Spatial Learners with School Problems to Succeed in Secondary School

Visual-spatial learners are people with a different learning style. They do well in life as engineers, scientists, architects and mechanics. However, they often have problems in school. They can learn the material, but they do so using a different process:

- They are excellent visualizers and *must* visualize in order to learn. With training, they can visualize and recite a string of 10 to 16 numbers forward and backward.
- They think in pictures, not words, and usually have great trouble expressing themselves in words. They need time to translate their pictures into words. Their handwriting is often hard to read and their spelling is idiosyncratic.
- They are gestalt learners who constantly search for meaning. They thrive on complexity, often fail at simple tasks and understand details only when they relate to the whole concept. For example, they can learn algebra before the times tables.
- The *do not* learn by rote and repetition; a few examples or problems are enough.
- They tend to be divergent thinkers. Because they focus on the larger picture, they often don't know how they have arrived at a conclusion or solved problem.
- They have problems following sequential material presented orally. They can overcome this limitation if the material is sufficiently complex and of particular interest.
- They tend to have a poor sense of time.
- They are acutely award of (often hypersensitive to) everything in their environment.

Ways middle school and high school teachers can help visual-spatial learners:

Have the learner sit in front of the room to minimize distractions but at least four to six feet from the chalkboard.

Write all assignments and directions on handouts or the board. Include dates due.

Don't assign a lot of problems for one concept. A few examples are sufficient.

Allow the learner to tape lectures and discussions.

Give oral tests and untimed tests and let the learner know they are untimed. The class period is often perceived as an implied time limit.

Allow the learner to use a computer for class work, assignments and tests.

Give two grades on papers: one for content and one for mechanics.

If teaching note taking, accept notes that are in pictorial format, not words.

If a lab notebook is required, allow the learner to transcribe class notes on computer and paste in typed notes or use a loose-leaf binder.

If teaching social studies, emphasize concepts – not dates and names.

Inform a parent if assignments are not being turned in or classwork is not being done and see if brainstorming together produces a solution.

Grade on material learned. Don't require everyone to use the same process to learn.

Relish and reward diversity and divergent thinking.