Learning/Cognitive Disabilities & Strengths, Related Parental Advocacy & Enhancing Your Child’s Inner Being

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Learning Objectives

- Review of cognitive/learning disabilities and challenges within the Aboriginal community.
- A general understanding of the brain and origins of cognitive and learning disabilities
- Overcoming through preferred learning styles and cognitive strengths, as individuals and in an Aboriginal context.
- The impact of psychological trauma and stressful/neglectful environments on cognitive/learning ability.
Learning Objectives cont...

- The major types of psychological assessments: Psychodiagnostic, Neuropsychological, Psychoeducational, Psychovocational, Neurovocational.

- The strengths and limitations of cognitive assessment, and challenges of differential diagnosis in the context of the Aboriginal community.

- The CFCAA Lifespan Parent Education and Intervention Model

- Parent advocacy and enhancing your child’s inner being in the context of cognitive challenges
Cognitive Impairment/Disability - Definition

- A brain disorder that interferes with perceiving, remembering, integrating and/or expressing of language or other information.
- The basic senses of vision and hearing are fine.
Learning Disability (LD) - Definition

- A brain disorder that interferes with perceiving, remembering, integrating and/or expressing of language or other information.

- Persons with LD have Average or Above Average IQ/general cognitive ability but at least one poor academic skill (reading, writing, math, etc)
Cognitive Disability/LD - Def’n Cont…

- diagnosed when information processing difficulties cannot be explained by:
  - environmental or cultural deprivation;
  - English as a second language
  - emotional difficulties
  - medical problems
  - hearing, visual or motor problems
**General Information About LDs**

- **LDs are prevalent**
  - 10% of Canadian Population have LDs
  - Representing 3,000,000 Canadians and over 360,000 Torontonians

- **Male to Female Ratios**
  - Commonly believed to be 2:1 ratio
  - Others say equal, but boys more frequently diagnosed

- **Comorbidity Between LDs and ADDs**
  - In Ontario, estimated that:
    - 80% of ADHD have LD; 30% of LD have ADHD
  - *Canadian Stats somewhat different (15%-20% of ADD have LD: much depends on procedures for identification and assessment)*
Population at Risk in Employment

- **Higher Rates of Underemployment & Unemployment**

- **More Difficulty Making It Through Work Probationary Period**
  - Nichols (1997)

- **Less Job Satisfaction**
Population at Risk in Employment

- **Less career maturity (elementary to college years)**
  - Bingham (1978); (Biller, 1980a; Biller (1982). Mercado, 1983). grades 6, grade 9/10

- **Problems - self-esteem, motivation, social adjustment**
  - Meyen, Schiefelbusch, Deshler, Alley, Moran, and Clark (1980)

- **Weaker work related social skills such as:**
  - job interviewing skills
  - accepting criticism from an employer,
  - providing constructive criticism to a coworker
  - explaining a problem to a supervisor.
Sources of Cognitive/Learning Difficulties in the Aboriginal Community

- Environmental/industrial toxins (water, land, air)
- Occupational exposure (e.g. mining, mills)
- Genetic predisposition (strengths/weaknesses)
- Traumatic brain injury
- Fetal substance exposure
A Brief Lesson in Neuroanatomy

- Which do you think is the more challenged brain hemisphere in traditional culture/lifestyle?

- Which do you think is the more challenged in Western culture/lifestyle?

- What likely happens as the brain evolves over generations within a culture?
Many studies have confirmed Aboriginal (and even “Bicultural”) have:

- strong visual perceptual skills
- Relatively weak English-based language skills
- Describe traditional communication? (oral, non-written)
- Language based LDs are diagnosed in the context of mainstream language (English/French)
- How does Aboriginal language development occur in the brain?
Types of Cognitive/Learning Disabilities

- Nearly infinite: over 70 types and sub-types of LD alone
- Some people may have more than one LD concurrently
- Range from mild to severe
- Each person is affected differently
Common Types of LD

- Verbal Learning Disability (Language based)
- Visual-Perceptual Learning Disability ("Non-verbal")
- Phonological (Speech-Sounds) Processing Deficits
- Math based
Components of Reading Diagram

- Helps understand Aboriginal relative weakness in academic reading/writing
- Helps understand neurologically based reading/writing/spelling disorders
Challenges for People with CD/LD

- Auditory & Visual Perception
- Attention/Memory
- Organization/Planning/Executing
- Problem Solving
- Motor Skills
- Academic Skills
- Social Skills
Summary of Common Aboriginal Learning Strengths

Aboriginal tradition and related brain evolution suggest preference for:

- Learning through observation
- Learning through demonstration
- "Hands on" learning
- Learning through doing
- Learning through practice
Attention Problems

- Difficulty sustaining attention during a long period of time
- This is characterized by:
  - distractibility
  - inconsistent performance
  - problems focusing on details
Attention Problems

- Easily distracted by background noise during a class
- Difficulty paying attention to verbal instructions
- Information may not be stored into memory for later use
Attention Problems

- Give clear instructions in small, single units rather than on long installment
- Repeat all information until it is understood
- Provide written information, task lists & steps
- Allow the person to get up and move around during the class (at back)
- Allow extra time
Auditory Perception Problems

- Difficulties in receiving and/or processing accurate information from their sense of hearing
- Difficulty with hearing the difference between similar sounds, inability to hear one sound over background noises
- There may be difficulty in grasping a series of commands or instructions
- Difficulty in memorizing language-based information
Auditory Perception Problems

- Difficulties hearing verbal instructions or questions if there are other noises in the room
- Slowness in responding to verbal questions or instructions
- Poor verbal information sequencing
- Poor listening skills
Auditory Perception Problems

◆ Solutions:
  - Reduce background noise
  - Allow extra time for instructions to be repeated
  - Speak slowly and sit closer to the client
  - Allow extra time for the person to process the information
  - Provide written instructions
  - Use diagrams/pictures
  - Demonstrate the task rather than describing it
Visual Perceptual Problems

- Difficulties taking in and/or processing information from the sense of sight
- Difficulties picking out an object or seeing the difference between two similar objects e.g. “v” and “u”
- There may be difficulty perceiving how far or near objects may be
Visual Perceptual Problems

- Incapacity to find key information provided in written form
- Inability to pick out one line of print from another
- Interferes with the ability to read, compute inventory and budgets
- Difficulties filling out a form
- May be clumsy, trip or bump into things
Visual Perceptual Problems

Solutions:

- Provide a room with minimal physical distractions
- Use oral instruction and/or audio-tape instead of written documents with the client
- Voice-activated computers will help with written work
- Give time to complete a task
- A talking calculator may be helpful
Temporal and Organizational Problems

- Difficulty in moving one’s body to achieve it’s goals
- Difficulty with the perception of time and space
- Trouble with the sequencing of information
- Difficulty in planning, organizing and problem solving
Motor, Temporal and Organizational Problems

Examples:

- Difficulty using the hands while writing
- Showing a lack of organization
- Arriving late or unusually early
- Confusion between left and right
- May have trouble finding the way to school, directions are difficult
- Difficulty “getting started” or sequencing tasks
Temporal, Organizational, Problem Solving Concerns

Solutions:
- Use timers or verbal response as reminders
- Map information
- Allow extra time for travel
- Use alarms or bells to signal changes
- Allow client to work at his/her own pace
- Allow extra time for processing
- Break task into component parts
- Provide structure and “sub goals”
Academic Problems

- Difficulties in the ability to use language and to express oneself in reading, writing, spelling and/or mathematics
- There may be difficulties in sounding letters, confusing words that sound similar and expressing thoughts on paper
Academic Problems

Examples:
- Not able/difficult to write exams
- Frequent spelling/grammar mistakes
- Unreadable penmanship
- Slow reading/poor comprehension
- Unable to do simple calculations
Academic Problems

Solutions:
- Provide information on tape
- Provide a spell checker or a proof reader
- Allow extra time for writing
- Provide verbal instructions that are clear and simple
- Demonstrate what needs to be done
- Adaptive Technology Software may help
Social Skills Problems

- Difficulty assessing one’s impact on others
- Difficulty judging non-verbal body language
- Difficulty interpreting facial expressions
- Difficulty picking up social cues and acting accordingly
- Behaviours may appear impulsive
- When severe, due to personality/psychiatric/alternate disorder
Social Skills Problems

- Examples:
  - Standing too close
  - Talking too loudly or too softly
  - Inability to read facial expressions, gestures and/or tone
  - When severe, often emotionally flat, inability to connect, disheveled
Social Skills Problems

◆ Solutions:

– Avoid using sarcasm, say what you mean
– Don’t expect hints, body gestures to convey information
– Maintain eye contact, assure you’re understood
– Paraphrase information to convey the information
– Always model appropriate behaviour for the client, role-playing may be helpful (milder cases)
Non-Neurological Sources of Cognitive & Learning Difficulties

- Psychological trauma/abuse
- Family stress, conflict, instability, chaotic home
- Family break up
- Mental health condition (parent/child)
- Malnutrition/hunger
- Alcohol/substance abuse/dependence
The Major Types of Psychological Assessment

To assess/diagnose and recommendations for:

- Psychodiagnostic – mental health (MH) conditions
- Neuropsychological – cognitive/brain & MH issues
- Psychoeducational – learning disabilities
- Psychovocational – job/career considerations
- Neurovocational – job/career considerations for cognitively/brain impaired
Strengths, limitations, challenges of cognitive assessment & differential diagnosis in the Aboriginal community

- **Strengths**: May provide critical diagnostic and intervention direction when validly performed/interpreted.
Strengths, limitations, challenges of cognitive assessment & differential diagnosis in the Aboriginal community cont…

- **Weaknesses**:
  - Lack of Aboriginal reference groups
  - Some tests culturally biased as are interpretations
  - Residential/current adverse school experiences □ poor performance
  - Genetic predisposition and psychosocial concerns, increase likelihood of misdiagnosis
Strengths, limitations, challenges of cognitive assessment & differential diagnosis in the Aboriginal community cont…

**Solutions:**

- Cultural sensitivity in all aspects of assessment
- Where appropriate converge cultural mores, values and traditions into process e.g. Vocational & Self-Reflective Assessment
- Seek special standards of practice guidelines from provincial overseeing bodies
- Aboriginal reference groups & professionals in long run
Pilot Native Child/Family Services & CFCAA Integrated Model

- “Life long” in-home parent education & life skills address role model gaps

- FASD/Neurodevelopmental & Mental Health Clinic: Early identification (from birth); de-emphasize cause of impairments (e.g. mother substance use)

- Individual & culturally focused interventions
Native Child/CFCAA Interventions

- Early childhood-preschool
  - In-home parent education
  - Speech/language intervention
  - Early childhood education (Head Start, Early Years Centres, both in Native Child & Family)

- School age
  - In-home parent education (& homework support)
  - Early neuropsychological/psychoeducational ass’t
  - Early Special Ed, Individual Education Plans
  - Cognitive rehabilitation treatment, tutoring
  - Neurodevelopmental class in Native Child school?
Native Child/CFCAA Interventions cont…

- **Late mid-school/High School transition**
  - In-home parent education (+ drug/gang inoculation, personal journey guidance)
  - Neuropsychological/psychoeducational (re)assessment
  - Ongoing Special Ed, Individual Education Plans
  - Cognitive rehabilitation treatment, tutoring
  - Vocational & Self-Reflective assessments for students and parents
Vocational & Self-Reflective Assessments

When desired by clients:

- Consider traditional family/clan occupations
- Self-reflective cultural component (TBA), ideas?
- Occupations identified to be complementary to traditional core values including respect for Mother Earth, and egalitarian relationships
- Would like to evolve occupations identified by Aboriginal leadership as important to future community objectives
- Timed with rights of passage & Elder guidance
Key Research Questions

- Cognitive rehabilitation stimulating brain structures demonstrates improved reading, spelling, writing capacity

- Will these interventions work for Aboriginal kids with cognitive/LD?

- Would they work for kids with no CD/LD but underdeveloped mainstream language skills?
Parent Advocacy

- Be proactive when problems are emerging
- Forge a good relationship with teachers, principal, secretary and all school personal
- Be polite but assertive
- Prepare your points/questions on paper and get input from others and/or practice presenting your concerns
Parent Advocacy cont…

- Request specialized testing if academic performance is below expectation for more than one year (e.g. by the end of the following term)
- Be present for assessment feedback and have prepared questions with you
- Contact school board if you have concerns about a culturally biased or otherwise unprofessional report
- You are your child’s best ally, don’t let them down
Enhancing Your Challenged Child’s Inner Being

- Be patient and understanding of their concerns
- Don’t think of them a lazy
- Remember that their difficulties will likely be reflected in low self-worth and distress, so work together
- Identify/help them identify & promote their strengths and interests
- Promote a balanced life in accordance with the Medicine Wheel
- Promote and foster all aspects of your heritage, to the extent that you are comfortable, while showing acceptance of healthy/neutral non-traditional interests
Summary of Common Aboriginal Learning Strengths

Aboriginal tradition and related brain evolution suggest preference for:

- Learning through observation
- Learning through demonstration
- “Hands on” learning
- Learning through doing
- Learning through practice
- Likely, learning through nature/interactions
- Likely, learning personal challenge/responsibility/quest/self-discovery actualizing
Background on CFCAA

- a registered charitable *foundation*
  - Meaning we cannot charge fees for service
  - Are not eligible for Trillium, etc grants
  - All services are free to the public

- mandate is to provide pragmatic prevention and intervention services to at-risk parents and their children
Our caseload to date

- 32 families treated over 18 months
- 2 parent coaches (now part time)
- 6 active cases currently
- Processing 4 new referrals

- 14 families of Aboriginal identity
- At one point 12 families active NCFST protection
- One coach of Aboriginal background
Target Group

- At Risk Children/Parents Include known or suspicions of:
  - Fetal alcohol (FASD);
  - Learning disability;
  - Traumatic brain injury (to moderate); AD/HD;
  - Psychological Disorders (to moderate)
Core Service Delivery Objectives
Competencies, Skills & Developmental

1) **Life Skills**: Safety/security; housing; health; Family schedule/organization/daily routine; Meals (nutrition, shopping, planning, organization, implementation); transportation; finances; laundry; cleaning/organization
Objectives (cont)

2) Parental relationship/skills: Attachment/bonding; communication skills; activities; appropriate discipline; conflict resolution

3) Social/community linkage support

4) Children: Academic readiness & support; problem identification/referral
Objectives (cont)

5) Adolescents: Problem identification/referral; academic support; vocational guidance
6) Adults: Problem identification/referral; Vocational guidance
Intervention Model
Infant Preschool Stream

1) Parenting coaching frequency range: ______
2) Parent directed stimulation – directed by parenting coach
3) Early Years Centres involvement
4) Non-custodial parent support.
5) Culturally sensitive/oriented milieu support.
6) Individual/group counselling.
Intervention Model
K-8 Stream

1) Parenting coaching frequency: range:
   
2) Parent homework strategies – directed by parenting coach

3) Non-custodial parent support.

4) Diagnostic assessment: Psychoeducational/neuropsych.

5) Educational advocacy
Intervention Model
K-8 Stream (cont)

6) Tutorial support/referral.
7) Psychoeducational reviews.
8) Culturally sensitive/oriented milieu support
9) Parental career support: Vocational/Neurovocational asst
10) Individual/group counselling.
Intervention Model
9-12 Stream

1) Same as K-8.
2) Youth Vocational/career asst/exploration.
3) Occupational placement support
Example of 3 LP males who had never before parented

- The children displayed significant emotional and behavioural symptoms (chronic runaway, no supervision, crying, fighting, and profound school issues).

- Tracy provided the following interventions leading to totally successful resolution.
Interventions

- personal diaries and helped in fill in the day with a schedule of events for each child, including when to get them up, prepare breakfast, buy food, clean house)
- set up talking circles and story times to help the children and the father to communicate and problem solve
- introduce an elder to support the families
- linked the families to Native support groups
- solved the school problems by advocating with the school, providing psychological testing, changing schools, obtaining a special class and negotiating with the school principal
Assessing for Learning Disabilities

- Psychodiagnostic/Psychovocational Assessment:
  - Intellectual Tests
  - Information Processing Tests
  - Academic Achievements Tests

- Vocational Components:
  - Vocational Aptitude (GATB)
  - Vocational Interests (CWPI, COII)
  - Demonstrated Transferable Skills
Disclosure: Yes or No?

- Is disability visible or not visible?
- Will disability be easily detectable?
- Is disability severe?
- Will disability affect interviewing process or job?
- What are the compensation strategies and required accommodations?
- Will it help to disclose or will it hurt?
- Can client needs & job success be met without disclosing?

Adapted from Learning Disabilities Program, York U.
Disclosure: Factors to Consider

- Is this an employment equity employer?
- Is there an employment equity (EE) officer?
- What does the EE officer have to say about accommodation and disclosure issues in the organization?
- What does the HR department have to say?
- Is there an accommodation policy in place?
More Factors to Consider

- Will disclosure improve your chances in any way?
- Will your disability affect the interviewing process (completing application forms, screening tests, initial training)?
- Will your disability affect your job performance?
- Do you have a positive and succinct way of describing your disability and how you compensate?
- Can you turn your disability into a positive?
- Is there a way to get what you need without disclosure? (e.g..... Will I have a word processor available?)
Employers Hire Ability, not DisAbility

- Clients need to be reminded that employers hire based on **what they can do**, not on what they can’t do
- Emphasize skills and achievements, not difficulties
- Create efficiency statements, not weakness statements
- Employers must be educated about the strengths of people with LDs and the accommodations that are helpful; don’t assume they know
Disclosure Timing: Pros & Cons

- On preliminary Job Application
- During Job Interview
- After the Interview When Offered Job
- After Start Job, But Before Trouble
- After You Run Into Trouble
- Never

Learning Disabilities Program, York U