

Milestones on the path to learning

Everybody's different, and there are many different learning and teaching styles. Pamela Wilson looks at a few of these models, and how your child can benefit if you choose the right one at the right time.

Consider the methods we use to teach our children the alphabet. We read them letter books, hum along as they belt out the ABC song, and help them trace letter stencils and piece together alphabet puzzles. But, which style is actually working best to help your child learn and remember their letters?

Traditionally, many educators subscribed to the theory that we all learnt in the same way. They referred to percentages such as these: we remember 10% of what we read, 20% of what we hear, 75% of what we see and 90% of what we do. Undoubtedly, the most effective way to learn something is to do it ourselves. But what we have to do in the first place depends on what senses we use to absorb information – and this varies from person to person.

Different learning styles

By tapping into the senses children use for learning and remembering, we can tailor their educational experiences to their preferred styles, says Dr Shirley Wyver, Developmental Psychologist at Macquarie University's Institute of Early Childhood. "Parents may notice they have one child who likes to talk and ask questions," she says, "whereas the other likes to observe. Both children are engaging in learning, but one is benefiting more from auditory input and the other from visual input," she says.

Dr Wyver says parents and teachers can help children by noting the activities that are most interesting to them and encouraging those activities. However, they should also offer a broad range of sensory experiences.

"Picking up on what your baby or child prefers to do is better than forcing them along a particular learning pathway," she says. "Children should also have a wide array of sensory experiences – and taking them out to engage the different senses and feelings is beneficial."

The VAKT model

An increasingly popular sensory learning model is VAK, or VAKT, which stands for visual, auditory, kinaesthetic and tactile. Kym Knight, a consultant with the Country Areas Program in rural and isolated state schools, says that most people are dominant in one or two of these learning styles.

"It's good to identify which of the sensory learning techniques they are most stimulated by, because it is the one through which they are going to learn best," says Ms Knight, who teaches the VAKT principle. "Once they are engaged in the way that stimulates them, help them to become more whole-brained sensory learners by giving them experiences with the other sensory modes."

Ms Knight says that encouraging whole-sensory learning is important, but asking children to shut down their preferred learning style is counterproductive.



"The worst thing you can do is stop a child doing what their senses need them to do," says Ms Knight. "The minute you ask a tactile or kinaesthetic learner to sit up straight, stop moving, stop fidgeting and listen, they shut down."

Unfortunately, today's education system still focuses on the traditional models of visual and auditory learning. Children with these learning styles often do well in traditional education settings because they have good visual recall of what they see and read, and can construct language well.

The key to engaging kinaesthetic and tactile learners, says Ms Knight, is to encourage their visual and auditory senses, while letting them demonstrate what they have learnt in their natural learning style.

"We have much better recall if we can teach someone else what we have learnt and what we know. So ask the child to teach you what it is they know, in the way they want to. When you know where their strength is, you can build capacity in the other areas."

Here, we help you to recognise your child's learning style (this can be difficult in very young children) and offer tips on how to engage all the senses.

Your child's learning style

Visual

This child stares intently at the point of focus and has good recall of things they have seen. They might prefer sitting in front of the TV while colouring or writing. They are stimulated by shapes, and colours.

Auditory

These children respond well to either internal dialogue, or music and noise. Those who are engaging in internal dialogue or self-talk may stare off into space or ask for you to repeat yourself. They work best with music in the background and in noisy places like the kitchen.

Kinaesthetic

This child is physically active and always wants to be up and moving. They're the ones swinging on their chairs. This child learns best when moving, particularly with their gross motor muscles.

Tactile

This child is the pen-clicker and hair-twirler. No matter what they're doing, their fingers are fidgeting. This child learns best when touching or moving their fingers. Writing, drawing and hands-on activities are all good ways to engage these children. **AP**

How to engage your child's senses

VISUAL

0-2

- Read books with large, interesting pictures
- Sit in front of small children and show them things close to their faces
- Young babies prefer black and white (zebras and pandas are perfect) or highly contrasting colours

2-4

- Use large, coloured-pencils and crayons
- When reading books, point out illustrations and features of the pictures that may engage the child
- Have them sit where they can see you best

4-6

- Search the internet with this child to find drawings that represent topics they are learning about
- Help them draw concept maps during lessons
- Use pictures or diagrams, or demonstrate information visually

AUDITORY

0-2

- Soft, rhythmic music is great sensory stimulation
- Talk to your baby at every opportunity
- Young babies respond well when we use higher-pitched voices

2-4

- Baroque music played in the background can stimulate senses
- Chatter to your toddler, hum, sing and introduce sound and noise

- When reading books, focus on the language and text, and discuss the content

4-6

- If your child is studying in the kitchen where there is noise, let them. Alternatively, put on rhythmic music in the background. (Music without words is best)
- Talk a lot and ask them to repeat things to you
- Put words to songs, or get them to hum them

TACTILE

0-2

- Run their fingers along different textures
- Give them plenty of toys that encourage tactile play
- Let them paint or draw with crayons

2-4

- Encourage playdough for playtime
- Use teddies to act out stories and let them touch the fabric
- Books with touch pages

4-6

- Give them a stress ball to squeeze and roll

- during lessons
- Engage them in hands-on experiences
- Have them take notes or drawings of what it is you are teaching

KINAESTHETIC

0-2

- Help them engage in sweeping arm and leg movements (kicking, splashing, etc) in the bath or in a pool
- Baby massage
- Take them out; engage them in real-life activities as much as possible

2-4

- Use puppets to act out stories, and encourage your child to use them
- Allow them to move and jiggle when you are teaching them things
- Use physical demonstrations, mime and role play

4-6

- Walk while you talk
- Let them write and draw on blackboards
- Ask them to demonstrate to you what they have learnt



Sensory Learning Quiz resource list

- www.familyeducation.com/quiz/0,1399,3-2740,00.html
- www.businessballs.com/vaklearningstylestest.htm
- www.southwater-jun.w-sussex.sch.uk/resources/Parent%20Helpers%20workshop%20-%20VAK_files/VAK%20children%20questionnaire.htm