

EXCEPTIONAL LEARNERS AMONG US WHO ARE THEY AND HOW CAN WE HELP THEM?

Motivated by her experience as a child, Lynell Nissley has studied the way some children learn differently and how parents and teachers can help them thrive. Lynell graduated from the FBTI Christian Ministries program in 2010 and teaches a course about exceptional learners in Summer Term as her family's schedule allows. Lynell assesses exceptional learners in the Lancaster area and is a consultant for their educators.

I was in eighth grade when my parents introduced my younger brothers and me to ADHD. My fifth grade brother was newly diagnosed, and it was a relief to my brother and parents to have an overdue explanation for his difficulties.

This was my first deep experience with the world of exceptional learners and it made one fact startlingly clear to me: challenges at school can be completely unrelated to intelligence. Until then, I had the childish assumption that my peers who struggled in school must not be as smart as me. But I knew my brother was brilliant—we spent mealtimes discussing perpetual motion machines and conversations with cousins included debates about science, math, or language concepts that stretched our middle-school knowledge to the max. And yet, this knowledgeable, articulate brother of mine spent every waking hour of the school year doing schoolwork, pulling good grades but enduring unimaginable levels of stress to do so.

In high school, I decided to become an advocate for students like my brother. Over the subsequent decade, God led me through years of tutoring, teaching, attending Faith Builders and additional higher education, and into the incredibly rewarding field of doing exactly that: evaluating all manner of exceptional learners so I could

provide guidance and answers for struggling students and their parents, teachers, and schools.

So how do you identify and enable the exceptional learners in your community? It would take a book (or more) to fully answer that question, but here are a few guidelines and ideas.

Defining Exceptional Learners

One definition for “exceptional” is “deviating from the norm” (MW.com), or in other words, different than average. Simply put, what works for most students is not working for these. One word of caution: if you have a very small class, you do not have a “norm”—there are too few students to have a good sense for what average is. I have seen this work both ways in small schools. Sometimes in these schools, it's easy to conclude incorrectly that a student is struggling when his few peers are exceptionally above average. Other times, it's harder to notice how deeply a student is struggling because her peers are above average. However, in a class of 15-20 students, the outlying one, two, or three exceptional students can be more evident.

Areas of Exceptionality

Academic challenges, commonly called learning disabilities, can manifest in any area. Approximately 80% of students with a learning disability have a specific type

called dyslexia, which causes difficulties with phonological (sound) awareness, reading decoding, reading fluency, and/or spelling. Dyslexia frequently appears to cause difficulties with reading comprehension. However, if the same material is read aloud, these students can answer the questions as well as their peers. Therefore, it is not a comprehension difficulty. It is rooted in their difficulty of decoding: sounding out the words produced by these otherwise meaningless squiggles we call letters, and doing so accurately and rapidly enough to still have mental energy left for understanding. In virtually every case, dyslexia also causes difficulty with spelling—encoding the sounds of our spoken language back into the correct letters.

Broader language-based learning disabilities can affect both comprehension and/or expression for both oral and written forms. In comprehension difficulties, listening comprehension is no better than reading comprehension. These students may read aloud as accurately and quickly as peers, but they cannot answer questions or retell what they just read or heard. The comprehension breakdown can occur at a word level (weak vocabulary), sentence level, or paragraph-and-larger level. Another breakdown is when the students struggle to express themselves verbally and through writing. They might struggle with oral expression and have difficulty retelling even familiar Bible stories. Sometimes, these students understand reasonably well, and when

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given multiple choice questions or asked to point to pictures for vocabulary terms, they can do so. But given open-ended questions or asked to express thoughts in paragraph form, they struggle.

Math learning disabilities often occur in one or more of three areas. Math fact fluency is knowing basic math facts accurately and quickly. Math computation is doing longer calculations, from long addition to fraction calculations through solving algebraic equations. Math concepts and applications includes solving story problems; using time, money, and measurement; understanding fraction and decimal values; grasping the concepts in trigonometry, and beyond. Sometimes math difficulties occur in multiple categories, but often, there is a primary area that is the weakest and it bleeds into the other areas of math.

Behavioral challenges include the myriad of non-academic actions necessary to be successful in the school setting. "Behavior" in this context is not a moral term indicating right and wrong. Rather, it refers to all the other actions that allow a child to demonstrate (or not) their academic knowledge. This can include the attention and organization concerns my brother encountered, or hyperactivity and impulsivity. Social and language difficulties emerge with the autism spectrum. Trauma histories create their own flood of attachment and social difficulties. Genetic predispositions to anxiety, depression, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, eating disorders, and other challenges can impact a student's success, particularly during the high school years.

Significant exceptionalities can occur with genetic mutations or deletions, such as Down syndrome. Medical events, like a significant traumatic brain injury, or the consequences of others' choices, such as prenatal drug and alcohol exposure, have long-term impacts on brain development. Many other times, intellectual disabilities occur for no known reason. The implications of significant exceptionalities often reach well beyond academic learning and affect functioning in other areas of life.

Enabling Exceptional Learners

If you or someone you care about has a known (or suspected) diagnosis, learn all you can about that condition. Teachers and parents are all busy, but one of the most loving things you can do for the children in your care is to know

them fully as God created them. That includes learning to know about any exceptionalities they are encountering. Some of the characteristics of the label will not apply, but other characteristics will shed significant light on the mysteries, grace for the struggles, and guidance for moving forward.

Find more experienced parents and teachers to learn from. What has worked for them with specific challenges? What resources did they find helpful to equip themselves? How did they go about getting a diagnosis, if needed? What programs or techniques or accommodations allowed their students to blossom into all God created them to be? The Anabaptist community is continuing to increase the available resources for exceptional students. Examples include websites like The Dock (www.thedockforlearning.org), workshops offered at a myriad of teacher seminars around the country and in-depth classes at Faith Builder's annual Summer Term.

Look for trustworthy, research-proven methods for interventions. The scientific literature on learning disabilities has come far in the last 30 years. Dyslexia, in particular, has an incredible research base. Sally Shaywitz's *Overcoming Dyslexia* provides foundational, life-transforming information. There are proven methods of help available for almost any exceptionality. But the proven methods require a lot of individualized instruction from a dedicated teacher, parent, and/or counselor, depending on the condition. Beware of the "cure all" or magic bullet. As much as we all want the fastest solution, if it sounds too good to be true, it usually is.

What Families and Schools Must Remember

No matter the challenges they present, exceptional children are not intentionally making your life difficult. Particularly in certain situations, such as the students who are forever acting without thinking or reacting out of trauma, it can seem like an "adults vs. child" situation. Nobody ever wins that conflict. As difficult as your life may seem due to these children in your home or classroom, their lives are even more challenging, typically through no choice of their own. Seek compassion through understanding.

Every child can learn. Not every child will learn the same material at the same age with the same type of instruction. But absolutely every child can take a

step forward from their current location to more knowledge and stronger skills—in academics, in behavior, in social skills, in emotional development, in spiritual understanding. Our job as parents and teachers is to figure out their current skills and shepherd them in their next individualized steps. This may require different methods and/or paces of instruction, different expectations for proof of learning, different types of responses to their behaviors, or different professional resources used, such as trauma/attachment counselors, speech therapists, or medical doctors.

There is hope—for you, for your child, for your student, for this precious child's future. Prayerfully seek support and direction from those who have walked this road. And remember, few things will have as much eternal impact as the imprint you leave on this child's soul. Make yours an imprint of love and understanding.



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ADMINISTRATORS CONFERENCE JANUARY 27-28, 2023

The effectiveness of our schools depends significantly on the effectiveness of the school administrator. The annual Administrators Conference helps administrators build vision for their schools and become effective leaders.

The conference is held at Antiochian Village Conference Center in Ligonier, PA. The registration fee is \$250 for an administrator and \$390 for a couple.

To register for Administrators Conference:

Visit fbep.org/acr
Email fbep@fbep.org
Call (814) 789-4518, ext. 220

PERSONNEL NEEDED

We are seeking applications for these staff openings:

- » receptionist
- » mentoring coordinator
- » ministry apprenticing coordinator
- » graphic designer
- » student recruitment coordinator

For information about these job descriptions or to request an application, contact Steven Brubaker:

srb@fbep.org
(814) 789-4518, ext. 239

NON-CASH DONATIONS

In addition to the regular gifts that donors make from current income, Faith Builders benefits from one-time gifts that donors make from the sale of real estate or the distribution of an estate.

For information about giving non-cash assets or including Faith Builders in your will, contact Vivian Mast:

vivianm@fbep.org
(814) 789-4518, ext. 220

UPCOMING EVENTS & TERMS

TWO-YEAR STUDIES BEGIN | AUGUST 22

We're delighted to welcome nineteen new students for the 2022-23 academic year. They will join twenty returning students. We anticipate a rich year of growing and learning together!

TEACHERS CONFERENCE | OCTOBER 7 - 9

Find details about this annual event at fbep.org/tc.

HEART & VOICE MEN'S CHOIR | NOVEMBER 11-12

The choir plans to give two programs. Visit fbep.org/hv for details.

OPEN HOUSE | NOVEMBER 17-18

Explore FBTI for a day! We welcome parents, pastors, and potential students for this free, interactive event. Register at fbep.org/open-house.

EARLY APPLICATION DEADLINE | DECEMBER 1

Deepen your knowledge of God and His world! To join a two-year study program, apply at fbep.org/academics/semester.

WINTER TERM | JAN. 2 - FEB. 3, 2023

Apply to attend at fbep.org/wt.

ADMINISTRATORS CONFERENCE | JAN. 26 - 28

This annual event is designed to equip administrators with vision for schools. For information and registration, visit fbep.org/acr.

FBEP GROWTH PROJECT

PART I: RESOURCE GROUP BUILDING

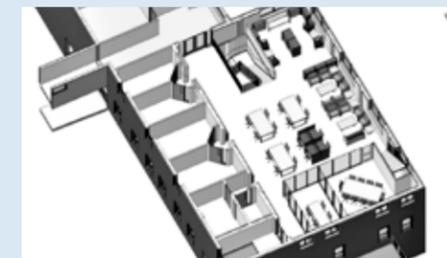
This building will house the Christian Learning Resource bookstore, its warehouse, and curriculum development office spaces. Our completion target is February 2023.



Trusses set on August 1

PART II: TRAINING INSTITUTE EXPANSION

This project will renovate the little gym and form a learning commons for students and instructors. Planning is 25% complete. Our projected starting date is Spring 2023.



Rendering of learning commons area

FINANCIAL UPDATE

Project estimate: \$3.5 million

\$1.44 million raised

\$2.06 million needed

WINTER TERM 2023

JANUARY 2-FEBRUARY 3, 2023

This five-week term serves students from a range of ages and walks of life. Young people come seeking spiritual growth and academic study at the same time that seasoned pastors come for refreshment and theological development.

We offer courses in Bible study, church history, theology, Kingdom living, and music. Students can attend for two, three, or all five weeks.

COURSES OFFERED IN 2023

Reading the Bible	Steven Brubaker
Anabaptism as a Worldview	Steven Brubaker
Creating Life-giving Spaces	Cynthia Brubaker
Preparing & Delivering Dev. & Sermons	Brandon Byler
Sermon on the Mount	Brandon Byler
Ephesians	John Coblenz
Understanding Depression	John Coblenz
Issues in Human Sexuality and Gender	John Coblenz
Women Caring for Women	Janelle Glick
Bible Study Greek	Lucas Hilty
Life and Leadership for Men	Melvin Lehman
Minor Prophets	Melvin Lehman
The Kingdom of God	Melvin Lehman
Beginning Choral Conducting	Brandon Mullet
Class Voice	Brandon Mullet
Listening To & Enjoying Good Music	Brandon Mullet
Music Fundamentals	Brandon Mullet
Music in the Life of the Church	Brandon Mullet
Growing into a Godly Woman	Marie Mullet
Church Growth	Allen Roth
Church Planting	Allen Roth
Historical Theology	Stephen Russell
Writing to Communicate	Anita Yoder
An Anabaptist Understanding of Salvation ..	Milo Zehr



For course descriptions, schedule, and application:

Visit fbep.org/wt
Email fbep@fbep.org
Call (814) 789-4518, ext. 220

Address Service Requested

FAITH BUILDERS NEWSLETTER The Faith Builders newsletter is published quarterly and serves to inform, inspire, and equip its readers. Subscription is free upon request.

LOOKING FOR EDUCATION THAT PRIORITIZES SPIRITUAL GROWTH?

EARLY APPLICATION DEADLINE: DECEMBER 1

Faith Builders Training Institute offers rigorous course work, apprenticeship, and discipleship in our two-year study programs. In an increasingly fragmented society, we commit ourselves to contributing to flourishing churches, effective schools, and joyful homes.

Students choose from three tracks of study:

- » **Teacher Apprenticing** cultivates the core skills, knowledge, and postures needed to serve in the classroom.
- » **Christian Ministries** equips students for committed Christian service in varied contexts.
- » **General Studies** cultivates the skills and commitments students need to thrive in post-secondary education.

Each track includes our core curriculum that helps students to see themselves and the world in proper relation to God. We want students to develop the capacities and skills needed to join the work God is doing in the world through His church.

Those seeking a college degree can build on this foundation and complete a bachelor's degree in as few as four or five additional semesters.

We are now accepting applications for studies beginning in August 2023! The early application deadline is December 1, 2022. Find more information and begin applying at fbep.org/academics/semester. We'd love to hear from you!

Browse options for scholarships and apply at fbep.org/admissions/scholarships.

