

Special classes for slow learners

Two out of 30 children in a classroom have learning difficulties, says Lakshmi Balakrishnan, Director, Phoenix Centre for Learning. The centre offers remedial classes and programmes that are aimed at the all round development and better academic performance of students in the age group of four to 13 years whose academic performance is hampered due to various factors such as lack of attention/concentration, memorizing difficulties, spelling errors, bad handwriting, omits things, etc. Children who are at risk of learning difficulty and slow learners can also benefit by this programme.

These children study in mainstream schools but appear to be significantly behind the expected level for their class. Phoenix employs occupational therapy that improves children's cognitive, physical, and motor skills and enhances their self-esteem and sense of accomplishment and techniques that will help children with logical reasoning, problem solving skills, and co-relation.

Phoenix has a team of occupational therapists and special educators. They perform a diagnostic educational evaluation assessing the child's academic and intellectual potential and level of academic performance. "Once the evaluation is complete, the basic approach is to teach learning skills by building the child's abilities and strengths while correcting and compensating for disabilities and weaknesses," says Ms. Lakshmi.

The classes are conducted in various session – afternoon session, half-way through sessions and exclusive remedial classes. These are done with the support of the schools that realise the need to help the child grow, rather concentrating on academic performance. At present, 40 children are undertaking the remedial classes here.

First symptom

The children who require the remedial classes are identified by the teachers, who refer them to child psychologists or counsellors, who further advise them for such classes. The first symptom that a teacher notices is the difficulty in writing pattern and inattentiveness, says Ms. Lakshmi.

In some cases, schools and even parents are aware of the situation and approach learning centres such as Phoenix. "But few parents are too anxious that they approach us even for a minor lagging in the child," says Ms. Lakshmi. "However", she adds, "early intervention is always better."

The centre also conducts counselling for parents on how to handle children at home. They are given suggestion on how the students can be motivated in activities such as games that will also supplement their learning. "Hyperactive children are to be engaged in activities to channelise their energy," she adds.

Children who exhibit one or more symptoms, often tend to be sidelined in class or get withdrawn leading them to have a low morale. They become mentally disturbed, shut themselves into a shell or throw tantrums. "When such children are brought here, we tell the parents and schools not to pressurise them to score marks," says Ms. Lakshmi.

"Quite a few parents as well as children are hesitant about enrolling themselves into remedial classes for fear of social stigma. Hence, we decided to provide them the comfortable feeling that they are not different from their peers by offering other coaching classes in the same premises," says Ms. Lakshmi. The centre offers day-care centre, after-school activities, remedial classes and tuition centre in the same building. Students taking remedial classes are also given coaching in drawing, music and instrument, depending on their interest.

Lakshmi also runs Funtellec Play School in Vijayalakshmi Street, Mahalingapuram. Both the playschool and the learning centre are a unit of Phoenix Education Foundation. One can sponsor the education of a child with learning difficulties through Phoenix Education Foundation.