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Rebooting Young Brains

Sparking new trends



In any given group of adults or children, countless labels hover in the air. These labels, self-affixed or bestowed by others, place limitations on people's capabilities and strengths. They often prevent people from doing things they otherwise could. Today, a very common label affixed to individuals, especially children in school, is ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder).

Dr. Rohn Kessler helps people overcome those labels and limitations. Warmly referred to as "Dr. Rohn" by his students, he is the founder and director of Sparks of Genius, an after-school center in Boca Raton, Florida, designed to help youngsters with symptoms of ADD succeed in the school environment... and in life. A slim, energetic man in his early sixties, with a bushy graying beard, a large black *yarmulke*, and an even larger smile, Dr. Kessler is an unusually intelligent, sweet and loving person. With his infectious warmth and enthusiasm, he hones in on a person's 'sparks of genius' — his/her special talents and interests — and encourages expansion of those sparks with specially-designed programs, activities and mental workouts. The result is an improvement in the person's overall functioning. Let's see for ourselves.

Chaya is 12 years old and happy with herself, a very different girl than she was six months ago. At that time, she was failing several subjects in school and had what her teachers called a "bad attitude." When her mother filled out the 39-Point Learning Assessment, it indicated an impulsive young lady

who was easily frustrated, had trouble listening, and probably had ADD.

Dr. Kessler's team looked at Chaya's attention skills, as well as the many ways in which she was smart. They saw a bright girl, with very high mathematical and kinesthetic intelligences, who disliked reading and writing yet loved being active

outdoors. (Kinesthetic learning takes place while the student is carrying out a physical activity, rather than listening to a lecture, reading a book or watching a demonstration.)

To help Chaya, Sparks of Genius used a unique combination of software to decrease impulsivity and improve cognitive skills, such as



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paying attention, listening and retaining, and thinking critically. This included a workout on a “mental power gym,” computer games customized to Chaya’s needs and designed to improve mental stamina, impulse control, and listening and processing speed. She spent time doing an engineering-physics puzzle game called “The Incredible Machine: Even More Contraptions.” And she trained with the amazing “Play Attention” program, which allows one

to operate computer video games with the mind. A special helmet with sensors is worn to detect brain activity, and the program responds based on that alone. This program in particular helps improve learning abilities by teaching one how to control his or her mind, and was originally invented for NASA astronauts to help them remain focused under exhausting conditions.

Dr. Kessler explored what Chaya liked — extreme sports, computer

games, and science — and began nurturing these sparks of genius. For example, he encouraged her mother to take her to the park and allow her to practice skateboarding; soon, Chaya became a champion skateboarder. By being given the opportunity to explore her interests, work hard at them, and then shine in a way she never thought she could, Chaya was given what Dr. Kessler calls “psychological vitamins.” She was rewarded for genuine effort, improved personal responsibility, and increased accountability. The vitamins helped to provide motivation.

Three times a month, Chaya “worked out” mentally with a personal trainer at Boca Sparks of Genius. She used a computer program at home for two hours a week for six months. After two months, she began making dramatic progress, both in school and at home. She continued to improve throughout the academic year. She has learned some new skills, such as juggling (a good brain exercise), in which she surpasses even her personal trainer. She is currently working on creating a video about some of the extreme sports she loves to play. She is confident, happy, respectful and responsible. Now, a year after completing the program, this 12-year-old meets the Sparks of Genius criteria of success: 1) The training transfers from the office and the computer to the real world, and 2) The training lasts.

Another true story involves a woman in her sixties, Sarah, who came to Boca Sparks of Genius because her husband was concerned about her cognitive decline, mostly involving memory. Sarah’s thinking had slowed and she might have lost her job, had it not been a family business. She had been tested and told she had mild cognitive impairment. The reason and diagnosis were incomplete.

At Sparks of Genius, Sarah was given customized exercises from the

“mental power gym” to improve her thinking, her memory and the processing speed of her brain. Although she had never used a computer before, she began cognitive training on a home computer, six times a week for thirty minutes at a time. In addition, she began walking briskly, a mile a day, and also meditating for thirty minutes daily.

Sarah’s sparks of genius were identified as writing, drawing, linguistics, and singing. She was encouraged to write her autobiography, draw pictures of scenes she found interesting, organize the family photographs, and sing, which she was able to do in several languages.

The decline in memory slowed down and soon began to reverse itself. She was able to concentrate better; she began to expand her part of the family business, and gradually, she returned to her previous, outgoing self. Instead of feeling that life is passing her by, she is really enjoying herself.

These stories illustrate how lives are transformed at Sparks of Genius. People come with all kinds of labels, but Sparks of Genius trainers know how to defy labels and move beyond limitations decided by others. The instructors recognize each student’s special talents and skills, for example:

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Is your child impulsive? Off task? Forgetful?

Select an answer to the following sample questions. Choose from these four choices: Not at all; A little; Often; Very often. If the answer to most of the questions is ‘Often’ or ‘Very Often,’ your child may be a candidate for a program like Sparks of Genius.

- Does your child engage in nervous habits?
- Does s/he wander off task before completing it?
- Is your child able to adjust his/her behavior to current situations?
- Does s/he hum at inappropriate times?
- Does s/he have sudden outbursts?
- Does s/he cry often?
- Is your child easily excitable and impulsive?
- Does s/he have problems following verbal instructions?
- Does s/he make unnecessary banter or noises?
- Does your child have trouble sustaining attention in a routine setting?
- Does s/he regularly make careless mistakes?
- Is s/he easily distracted?
- Does your child start things and not finish them?
- Is s/he forgetful?

listening, thinking, decision-making, mathematics, physical sports, building, music, writing, singing, dancing, speaking, acting, or any other abilities that help define that individual person.

Currently, the age range of the students there is 7-82, and they are hoping to expand the upper limit. What is the cost of this innovative program? Every case is different, but Dr. Kessler suggested that a year in the program can be cost-compared to buying a new *sheitel*.

The premise of Sparks of Genius is “Think it will happen and it happens.” Indeed, one cannot miss the positive energy permeating the Sparks of Genius environment. I had a

surprising experience myself! At one point in our interview, Dr. Kessler showed me his juggling balls. I told him that I could juggle a little and went on to demonstrate, using three balls. The doctor asked me if I could juggle four balls, to which I answered, “Definitely not, no way!”

Dr. Kessler didn’t see any reason why not. “I’ll have you juggling with four balls in two minutes,” he said, with a warm, encouraging smile.

So I tried it. After three minutes of trying, buoyed by a slew of positive reinforcement from Dr. Kessler (“Look how great you’re doing! You’re very good at this”), I was juggling with four balls, something I had thought my whole life I could not do. It felt great!

So far, the program has been resoundingly successful in Boca. Dr. Kessler’s excitement and motivation to help people overcome their limitations is contagious. Soon, other systems for re-educating and re-training the brain are sure to be offered all over the U.S. As Dr. Kessler puts it, “With the help of Hashem and emerging brain-based technology, we will merit to help thousands to spark their genius.” 