

Backgrounder – Cris Rowan and Zone'in Programs Inc.

While working with children in a school setting for over a decade, pediatric occupational therapist and child development expert Cris Rowan observed that learning difficulties weren't necessarily relevant to a child's intelligence, but more relevant to that child's ability to stay focused and alert. Rowan observed that many children's energies were either too charged, or alternatively too "zoned out" to be able to listen or learn. Rowan also noticed that many children were experiencing difficulty printing, which is the foundation for literacy in all subjects. Extensive research review by Rowan indicated that many of children's school performance issues were related to increased use of TV and videogames. As child developmental delays and behavior disorders continued to escalate, Rowan stepped away from the school setting and developed *Zone'in Programs Inc.* home to *Zone'in Products, Workshops, and Training.*

What teachers and parents often forget is that learning and attention start in the body, not the brain. When a child's body energy is *grounded* and *centered*, then their brain is free to think and create. Children ground their energy through specific types of movement, mainly the type of movement we see when doing *heavy work* activities involving push, pull, lift and carry. Children therefore need to move to learn, and when they don't move, we see energy all over the map, and learning becomes impossible.

Consider the state of human biology 100 years ago. Prior to going to school, children were often up at the crack of dawn out milking cows, hauling hay or chopping wood. Children would arrive at the schoolhouse physically "spent", and subsequently mentally ready to learn. There were no TVs, there were no videogames, and there were no computers. Children played or worked outside all the time: running, jumping, climbing or swinging and participating in creative play such as building forts, riding bikes and playing a variety of outdoor games. These outdoor physical activities were absolutely crucial elements to achieve adequate sensory, motor and attachment system development for learning. Maldevelopment of these neurological systems from excessive TV and videogames use has resulted in a host of developmental impairments, resulting in difficulty attending to tasks, as well as being able to print and read, the basics of literacy in all subjects. Studies completed in 1999 by the Kaiser Foundation indicates children spend on average 6.5 hours per day watching TV or playing videogames, resulting in mental and physical disorders that we are only now beginning to understand: obesity, attention deficit, addiction, sleep disturbance, attachment disorders, health disorders, poor school performance, accelerated sexuality, family conflict and violence. Children need to move, and what that means for parents and teachers, is helping children to harness their energy to get their bodies and minds focused.

Why do we still need to teach our children to print? Rowan responds that recent advances in technology have mistakenly led parents and teachers into thinking that computers will solve all children's problems, taking the place of printing, math, and even basic learning skills. On the contrary, recent studies show that technology is actually *impeding* children's ability to learn. During her *Foundation Series Workshops*, Rowan states many teachers and parents have remarked that while they all agree that reading is still an essential skill, printing is not. Many elementary teachers actually believe that computers will replace children printing. Subsequently, there has been an erosion in emphasis and amount of time teachers spend teaching this essential skill. What these well-meaning teachers do not understand is that learning to print is a precursor for reading, spelling, and sentence formation. Therefore if a child cannot print, that child is functionally illiterate.

Letter formation is a complex task that requires many sequential components to come online for eventual printing skill development. First a child needs to achieve letter recognition, which develops primarily through a child's observations of his own attempts at letter formation, supported by repetitive practice and observation of the teacher or parent. Printing is therefore a *visual* and a *motor* task and requires practice of both components for skill achievement.

As printing is a motor task, the motor plan for each letter and number needs to be firmly established for that child then to be able to free up conscious thought for tasks such as reading, spelling, and sentence production. Children who are slow in establishing a motor plan for letter and number production, or who have *inconsistent* motor plans, e.g., making their letters different ways, spend an inordinate amount of conscious mental energy in letter formation, leaving very little mental energy left for creative thought required for reading, spelling, and sentence production. When a child watches her hand and pencil making a letter or a number, this image is embedded in her visual memory, like a photograph taken with a camera. For proficiency in letter and number production, many visual images of the correct motor plan need to be firmly embedded in the child's visual memory in order for reading, spelling, and sentence production to proceed smoothly. This process requires extensive time devoted by both parents and teachers in showing children a consistent method for letter and number production, with ample opportunity for practice. Failure to do so results in childhood illiteracy.

In order to help these children, Rowan has designed *Zone'in*, *Move'in* and *Unplug'in* educational programs, which address attention, printing and reading, and technology reduction. *Zone'in* optimizes attention, learning and listening ability by helping children to understand more about their body energy, and how to get their energy "Zone'in to Learn." *Move'in* is a board game and computer program that provides a fine motor assessment and intervention for sensory and motor impairments, and improves printing and reading skill. *Unplug'in* is a developmental tool that builds performance skills in the *Me*, *We*, *Earth* and *Spirit* dimensions, essential for technology reduction.

Rowan has also designed a series of seminars called the *Foundation Series Workshops* to educate teachers, therapists and parents regarding the damaging effects of technology on child development, and provides strategies and techniques to help children optimize learning and academic performance. Rowan's *Foundation Series Workshops* have proved so successful, that she is now training other pediatric occupational therapists through her recently established *Zone'in Training Programs*.