

Geetha Rao

Fifteen per cent of the world's children have learning difficulties (dyslexia), but either parents are not aware of it, or they do not know who to approach for help. Or, they shy away from help because of the stigma attached to their children, if they have to be sent to special schools. For such parents in Bangalore, Bela Raja, who works with children with learning problems after school hours at her residence, would seem a godsend.

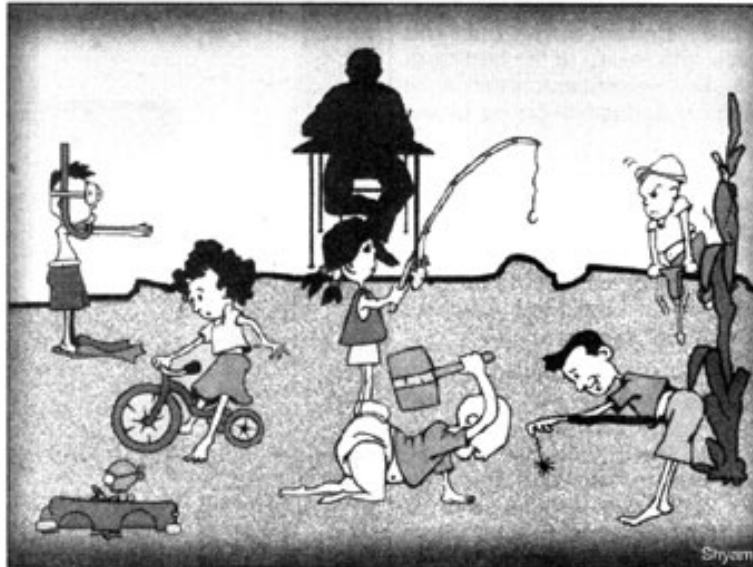
"The learning disability may be seen in difficulty to read, spell, write or work with numbers," says Bela Raja, who also works on a voluntary basis at the Resource Centre at the Valley School with such children.

Dyslexic children possess low self-esteem, though they have average and above-average IQ levels.

Simply put, a child with learning difficulty has certain circuits in the brain that do not function as they should, and thus interpret wrongly, to the seeing eye or the hearing ear, causing confusion in an otherwise intelligent child.

"If such children have to stay in the main stream, they need attention on a one-to-one basis," she says. Her focus with such children has been two-fold. To provide assistance in terms of multi-sensory or remedial teaching, and to in-

She helps children with learning disability



volve the parents in the process, so that they can take over from where she has left off.

So, she insists that one of the parents attends the first eight to 10 classes to learn the strategies. "The education of the child is combined with the education of the parent."

She begins with an informal assessment of the child, and based on it, pinpoints the area of weakness. "Before everything else, the child must be made to feel comfortable. That's why it helps to work in a homely atmosphere. They can come here, tinker with the com-

puter, play table-tennis in the garage."

Such children possess low self-esteem, though they have average and above average IQ levels. "Such children feel they are stupid, that something is wrong with them; it is a downward spiral from then on."

So, once he is comfortable, "We begin by talking. We build a relationship. That builds up the child's self-esteem. After one or two classes, the child's area of difficulty is targeted. The entire thrust is placed on that, by giving the child

Some famous personalities who were learning disabled:

- Albert Einstein
- Winston Churchill
- Agatha Christie
- Tom Cruise
- Thomas Alva Edison
- Leonardo da Vinci

relevant exercises that are neither too easy nor too complicated."

It is of paramount importance that such difficulties are identified as soon as possible. By six, a sensitive teacher can do that. "Since there is no academic pressure at that age, it can be set right. The later it gets, there is too much pressure on the child, and there is the additional burden of academic backlog," she says.

A silver lining is that such children possess some other area in which they are gifted "since the brain overcompensates. The trick is to highlight that area to build self-esteem in the child," says Ms Raja. When they are set right, it is amazing to see how such children are transformed. From shy, withdrawn children, they bloom into confident personalities.

Bela Raja avers, "We must help such children, else we may be doing a disservice to society."

(Bela Raja can be contacted on tel: 5532418)