

Just wired differently

Parents need to feed into their child's potential, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

HILARY Craig hands me a sheet of paper and tells me to read the sentence: "god yzal eht revo spmuj xof nworb kciuq eht". Surely it's one huge typo.

It doesn't help when she continues to urge me to read it. I am confused and start to think I'm stupid. If this continues, I have no doubt I will become frustrated and angry that I cannot decipher what I suspect is an easy sentence. Craig is trying to help me understand what a child who learns things differently, goes through. The sentence reads: "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog."

"We've been taught that you start reading from the top left to the bottom right of a page. Some children, however, can't do this. Some of them can read backwards more easily," she says at the launch of her book, *Small Steps, Big Differences: A Toolkit For Parents Of Children Who Fall Through The Cracks*.

With post-graduate qualifications in education, specialist qualifications in dyslexia and other conditions, the 68-year-old also has close to 40 years' experience teaching in schools, colleges and private practice. None of these, however, compares with her personal experience bringing up a child who faced challenges in school.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Craig shares: "My middle child, who is now 40, was one of those who fell through the cracks. I was supposed to know how to help him, I had all the practical training. Yet, I couldn't apply it. He was brilliant at Lego and very mechanical but he couldn't cope with Maths. As parents, we don't always see our own children clearly. When I finally sent my son for tests, they confirmed what I already knew. So, I sent him to a tutor. Years later, my adult son said to me, 'when I was in school, I thought I was stupid but when you sent me to the tutor, I knew I was stupid'."

It is obvious that what her son said still stings. Nevertheless, it reinforces the humility which underlies her objective for publishing her book. "I know what it is like to not know where to turn to for help," she says. It is from this place of not knowing that Craig wrote her book.

"Every child is unique," she adds. "Sometimes, they just can't conform and need extra help. I prefer saying that a child has learning differences. We don't 'fix' children. There's nothing to fix. We help them adjust to the world around them. These children are highly intelligent but can't manage certain subjects

and their confidence gets knocked down."

A lot of it comes from positive reinforcement, of course.

EDUCATOR, THERAPIST

Born and bred in Ireland, Craig is, today, recognised internationally as an innovative educator, therapist and an enthusiastic and dynamic workshop presenter. She currently runs Hils Learning Centre in Mont Kiara, Kuala Lumpur, together with more than 10 teachers.

As she describes some of the other children she met and helped, she also shares some of her experiences of adults. The most fascinating was with students in a correctional facility for offenders in Canada.

"Our programme was aimed at rehabilitating them. Here's a story to give you an idea of how clever these men are. I arrived at the facility one morning and I realised I'd lost my keys. One of my students came along and when I told him my problem, he asked if I had a credit card. Using that credit card, he opened the door. Later, he helped me open the door of my car and even started it for me. All these require brains. But what all these men had in common was that they struggled to read. They were the ones who were neglected in class and who sat at the back of the class. They were the ones who slipped out easily and played truant."

This highlights the issue that for such children, the conventional school system can be challenging and is a major roadblock to their learning.

Craig's core beliefs are that all children progress through different methods of learning and address four essential skills—memory, listening, attention and social skills.

Sarah Hartney, 48, is responsible for creating all the illustrations in the book. She makes a sobering statement. As a parent of a child with learning differences, she says, she found little help for her child in Europe. "You would think we would have all these there, but I found it here in Kuala Lumpur. Schools like to say a child is ADHD or the child is dyslexic or is autistic. It makes it easier for them. But, sometimes, a



Craig is recognised as a dynamic workshop presenter.



All children progress through different methods of learning.

child is a little of this and a little of that." And that can make it difficult for everyone involved to bring out that child's potential.

As Craig reads an excerpt from her book, she names famous people who had struggled in school — Steve Jobs, Michael Phelps and Richard Branson. When you examine these people's backgrounds, she says, you will find there is a strong supportive adult behind them.

"As parents, you know your child intimately, but some parents will put on a mask and ignore their child's struggles. Often, the problem is that a parent is seeing it his way and a child sees it his way," she says.

"Often, schools do enormous damage. For example, a child loves to sing and is musically inclined but the child just can't recite her times tables. Here, teachers may choose to put the times tables to music and, suddenly, the child knows all the times tables."

Methods employed by the teachers at Hils Learning Centre include playing games. "Take a game like congkak," says Craig. "When a child puts a shell into a hole, he will develop small muscle development. It also teaches children to follow a sequence and they learn how to count. They have fun playing the games and don't realise that they

are learning at the same time. With games, we're teaching them how to win or lose, gracefully. After all, who wants to be friends with someone who is better all the time?" she says.

Craig's parting advice is very simple: "You have to become aware of what your child can do and build on that. Feed into your child's potential."

Small Steps, Big Difference: A Toolkit For Parents Of Children Who Fall Through The Cracks, published by Partridge Publishing, is available at Hils Learning Centre, www.happiness-is-learning-success.com, Barnes & Noble and Amazon.com.