

## When Educational Promises Are Too Good to Be True

When a child struggles to read, parents and educators want to do everything possible to help that child keep up with his or her peers and be successful in school. But as much as we want that to happen overnight, that is not how it usually works. It can take years of hard work, even with the best teachers and instruction. Unfortunately, some organizations or individuals may take advantage of parents when they are most vulnerable by making exaggerated claims or false guarantees based on “pseudo science.” This fact sheet provides guidance in learning to critically evaluate programs, avoid scams, and move forward toward providing instruction that will truly help the children who need it.

### **Exaggerated Claims**

Some organization and individuals make exaggerated claims about their products or offerings. They may say that their students quickly learn to become better readers and thinkers. They may insist that their programs can accomplish in a few short months what more realistically can take years of hard work. They may use tactics such as parent testimonials to lure desperate parents into spending thousands of dollars on programs that do very little to help children.

Parents must learn to be skeptical of any organization or individual making claims that seem too good to be true. Such claims should raise serious questions about the credibility of those who make them. False promises often create frustration and loss of self-esteem for a child who does not make the gains predicted. Organizations touting unfounded or unrealistic success also do a disservice to professional organizations doing credible work using evidence-based strategies, albeit work that may take many months or even years.

### **False Guarantees—Read the Fine Print**

Parents desperate to find help for their children need to be aware of “quick fixes.” They should ask questions and request evidence to support claims of success. Some programs offer guarantees but it is extremely important to read the fine print regarding any guarantee offered by an organization or individual being considered for working with a child.

### **Science or Pseudo-Science?**

To trick the consumer, concepts that are complicated—such as neurology and brain function may be oversimplified. Consumers may be lured to believe that by “curing” a “single underlying condition,” a complex pattern of difficulties will disappear.

Results of brain research, much of it sponsored by the National Institutes of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), suggest that different parts of the brain working together are responsible for complex cognitive processes and that the communication between these brain centers is required for successful learning to occur. There is much research evidence demonstrating that when these systems are not working well together, learning will be negatively affected. There is also evidence to show which types of instructional approaches are likely to be effective for helping people with different patterns of learning. Unfortunately, none of these instructional approaches is a “quick fix.”

Advertisements can be misleading too. A program can sound very scientific, even though the claims being made are not supported by evidence. Parents must become “consciously skeptical” of such claims. Actually, most learning disorders arise from a highly complex genetic-environmental interplay, but the unsuspecting parent can be fooled by “pseudo-scientific” jargon

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and miss the lack of solid, supporting documentation.

### Questions to Ask

If you are trying to determine the effectiveness of a program or therapy, the following questions are a good place to start.

- *Do the claimed gains in skill development transfer to gains in reading, writing, math, or study skills?*

Children can become very good at exercises, such as sorting, if they are given the time to practice, but does the skill actually transfer to better reading, spelling, writing, or math skills?

Computer games are sometimes incorporated in the therapy or instruction and may or may not target the academic skills a student needs. Be wary of programs or products that do not seem to actually target the child's learning needs.

- *Do the claimed short-term gains in specific skills translate to long-term gains? Are the gains permanent?*

Sometimes students work intensely on specific drills or computer learning games and make impressive gains in post-therapy testing on the specific skills they were practicing. Yet these skills often diminish over time, much like children who take music lessons. Children can learn skills while they are taking lessons and practicing, but if they put the instrument down for any length of time, they begin to lose these fledgling skills.

- *Are there independent scientific studies showing the effectiveness of a given treatment?*

Before choosing a specific program for your child—especially one that makes claims that seem too good to be true—ask for studies that examine the efficacy of the program. Make sure the studies are reported in legitimate educational or scientific journals that are reviewed by other researchers for their results. There is a big difference between company research, consumer

testimonials, and an independent scientific study of a specific therapy's effectiveness.

It is essential that the studies are well designed whether they are conducted by the organization itself or independent researchers. No single factor determines the quality of research, but the following questions are important to consider.

- *Were there adequate controls to determine the impact of the treatment?*
- *Could the results be determined by factors other than the program or therapy used?*
- *How many students were included in the treatment or study?*
- *Were appropriate assessments used to track student achievement?*
- *Did the tests or assessments measure the skill or skills that the researchers claim the instruction improved?*
- *Are the results reported in language that is understandable and do they target the academic areas at the focus of the therapy or instruction?*
- *What kinds of student gains are documented?*
- *Was there adequate supervision to ensure that implementation of a program was performed with fidelity so that the impact of student achievement could be determined?*
- *Did the individuals providing the instruction or therapy have adequate training and skill to use the program or materials as specified by the program or product developers?*
- *Was there sufficient training, support, and supervision to ensure that the instruction or therapy was performed with fidelity and with appropriate intensity?*

Fortunately, most organizations and individuals do not aim to take advantage of unsuspecting parents. An organization such as the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) offers support to programs that prepare professionals for helping

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children who are having difficulty reading. IDA has developed the *Knowledge and Practice Standards for Teachers of Reading* to guide the preparation, certification, and professional development of teachers and therapists who provide educational programs for individuals in need of reading instruction. Colleges and universities that offer programs to train individuals to teach students to read may apply for accreditation through a standards review with IDA. Programs that meet these standards should be equipped to prepare professionals to effectively work with individuals who have challenges learning to read or write.

For guidance in choosing educational professionals, the following IDA Fact Sheets (<http://www.interdys.org/FactSheets.htm>) may also be useful:

- A Parent's Guide to Effective Instruction
- Evaluating Educational Professionals
- Helpful Terminology

Most of us agree that it's important to ask difficult questions when buying a car, purchasing a house, or determining a best medical treatment. Shouldn't we do the same when choosing

effective instruction for teaching our children with learning challenges?

### References

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