



2011 G.E.A.R. Parent Network winning poster, "Hand In Hand" by an 11-year-old Maine artist.

Learning How to Learn

By Callum Toole

*Children's Mental Health Awareness Day - May 3, 2011
Hall of Flags, Augusta, ME*

My name is Callum Toole. I'm a 14 year old 8th grader from southern Maine. I have a learning disability called NLD, which made learning tough for me in school and in group activities. Things are changing for the better and I'd like to share why.

I used to be super uncomfortable with new people, places, and unexpected sounds and smells. I disliked certain foods and clothes and got upset easily. I had a hard time falling asleep, so I was tired a lot. Keeping up with my classmates continued to get harder for me.

I love to read, but got lots of headaches which made remembering things challenging. I don't think anyone really understood how hard all this was for me. So I pretended to understand things when I didn't. Then I'd get home and forget how to do my homework or fall apart angry and frustrated. It was TOO hard.

My fears and anxiousness got worse when I started junior high. Kids were mean a lot. I had no friends, and didn't understand why. I thought I was smart, but couldn't figure out why I struggled so much.

Then things started to change. My mom looked for different kinds of help for me. She joined an organization for families like ours to get support for her and resources for me.

Slowly, I began to understand how to make things work best for me. I started doing a music & exercise program called Integrated Listening Systems. It makes my brain work faster so I can study and remember better. My therapist helped me overcome my fears, doubts, and anxiety with strategies to stay calm and work through challenges using my courage.

Our family advocate helped my mom explain my individual education plan (IEP) so my teachers and tutors could use new teaching strategies to help me understand the lessons more easily. I started feeling more confident with my grades. I did best with cue cards, memory short cuts and "high repetition" of new information and skills.

My principal said I was brilliant. He and our family advocate helped my mom explain to my teachers how I learn best. There are many people in my life who understand what I need, including me. The patience of my karate teachers, voice and theatre coach, eye doctor, therapists, and ILS coach helped motivate me to succeed.

Mrs. Gallo and my eighth grade team are the best teachers I've ever had. They're kind, motivating, and very funny. This is my best year! I've learned to stand up for myself. It's gotten easier to ask for what I need at school and with my friends. Because I believe in myself now, I stand up for other kids too when they get bullied. NO ONE should EVER be bullied!

Earning my black belt, acting/singing & being a stage hand in school plays; joining the yearbook staff; and joining our school recycling program, helps me feel like a leader in my class.

Last thing; I'm lucky to have parents who stuck by me when things got REALLY frustrating. They believe in me. Thanks for listening.

Sincerely, Callum Toole