

"I CAN SUCCEED"

HELPING CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

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The Institute for Learning Disabilities and ADHD, a joint project of IDC Herzliya and the Schneider Medical Center in Israel, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and the Israel National Health Services, has developed I Can Succeed (ICS), a groundbreaking program to help children with learning disabilities.

Headed by the institute's director, Dr. **Daphne Kopelman-Rubin**, ICS will happen at Herzliya's junior high schools this year, with plans for its implementation throughout Israel over the next three years.

Until now, children with learning disabilities have received help primarily on an individual level – professionals working with each child and their families to help them find solutions to their disabilities. According to Kopelman-Rubin, an educational psychologist who has served as the director of the Learning Disability Clinic at Schneider Hospital for the past 11 years, this is simply not enough.

"We need to attack these issues on an organizational and societal level," she tells me over coffee at IDC Herzliya. "Most failure of schoolchildren is due to learning disabilities and ADHD, but the mistake is to focus solely

on the academic aspects – this simply will not work. We have to understand the emotional aspects – how the children interact with their families, friends and teachers – and we have to deal with the key people who make the decisions at an organizational level. If we do this and provide an intervention that is structured on the one hand, but flexible enough to accommodate each child's specific needs on the other, then children who might have dropped out can end up having successful academic careers, and success in life."

Until now, helping learning disabled children has involved first conducting a broad psycho-educational assessment and then offering a plan that included psychological treatment for the children and their parents, and recommended accommodations for the children at school – such as extended time for exam taking or alternative evaluation methods.

"This almost always ends in frustration," says Kopelman-Rubin, "because it's always been very hard to actually implement many of our recommendations at the school level. We came to the conclusion that if we want to make a real change, we would have to involve the schools, the municipalities and the Ministry of Education itself, so that we would all be

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of one mind about what is needed to make a difference in these children's lives."

One core aspect of ICS is to identify the resilience factors in children with learning disabilities and ADHD – the factors that, if present, signify that the child has a good chance of succeeding in life, despite the disability. The program is actually built around these factors.

"You can follow the academic journey of two children with learning disabilities and ADHD and see that one succeeds while the other fails," says Kopelman-Rubin. "The big question is: what makes the difference? If we knew this in advance, perhaps we could intervene in some way that would enable both children to succeed."

One feature Kopelman-Rubin and her team have pinpointed as crucial is helping children to gain better self awareness – to know their strengths and weaknesses and how to compensate for them, and to know how to express themselves and become better self advocates. ICS also focuses on building skills such as time organization and communication, so that a child can be a positive force in seeing that his or her specific needs are met.

At the family level, ICS provides training to parents on how they can assist their children, and also on how they can build productive relationships with their child's school, since this is often a strong point of friction. And at the organizational level, ICS forms relationships with the heads of a municipality's educational and psychological services, and they are working directly with the supervisor at the Ministry of Education at the national level, with all parties involved in building the process together.

The project's pilot occurred three years ago in southern Tel Aviv, with a 7th grade class of 47 learning disabled pupils. The children, all from a low socio-economic background, were each at a high risk of dropping out of school by high school. Three years later, all but one are still in school.

"It's amazing," says Kopelman-Rubin, eyes shining. "No one believes it. And what's even more spectacular is that while we provided training and supervision at the school for the

first three years, today they are implementing this ICS program completely on their own – and not only with these children, but with the 7th, 8th and 9th graders as well. This is the fulfillment of one of our major goals: that ultimately each school will be able to take over and run the program on their own, according to their unique structure."

According to Dr. **Yehudit Eldor**, director of the Learning Disabilities Unit in the Psychological Counseling Service, Israel Ministry of Education, "The fact that this program was implemented so successfully in this complex school, says that it could suit any other educational framework. I believe that it is suitable for any and every school that believes that it has the duty and responsibility to promote children with learning disabilities."

One of the project's national sponsors is the Demonstration Project, a National Insurance Institute fund that supports innovative and experimental programs. According to **Sarit Moray**, the fund's director, the issue of children with learning disabilities and ADHD is a major problem affecting many segments of Israel's population. "We are learning how deeply it is connected to the child's ability later on to access higher education or find proper employment, and a great deal of research has shown that a high percentage of kids who drop out of school or end up in prison, suffer from learning disabilities. So ICS aims to be preventative as well as curative, and we are very pleased with its progress so far."

In addition to ICS's success in helping children stay in school and succeed, there have been other measurable successes as well. According to Kopelman-Rubin, children with learning disabilities often suffer from other accompanying disorders, such as depression and anxiety. "In our first pilot, we found that levels of depression and anxiety went down. Then we used the same intervention, with a slightly different protocol, at Schneider Hospital with individual families, and found that there was also a significant improvement in the pupils' executive functions – skills that include organization, learning from mistakes and inhibiting impulsiveness."

Perhaps as society understands more about learning disabilities, we will come to realize

that just as we all have different eye and hair color, we each have a different learning style as well. "We cannot expect that 'one size fits all,' Kopelman-Rubin insists. "A learning program should be adapted to the specific needs of each student, and with one-on-one guidance and support, these children will truly have the chance to succeed. Today, the fact that we are not acting alone, but have the full support of the Ministry of Education and the National Insurance Institute, gives me the belief that after so many years of working in this area, we can make a real change at a systemic level."



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