

## **Awakening Those Dreams of Possibility**

The greatest challenge most adolescents with learning differences face, is to look beyond their history of setbacks, struggle and rejection, to the limitless possibilities that tap into one's strengths. For it is this shift from a deficit based perspective to one that is more strength based, is that transformative shift that must occur for growth and development to continue. This is key to maturation, and ultimately the transition into young adulthood. For that reason, our role in the lives of these students is to understand this struggle, to encourage imagination, and to support the dreaming of big dreams. This begins with a recognition of the significance this dreaming process had in our own lives.

When I was a boy I had dreams of being a major league baseball player, superhero, veterinarian, "train driver", astronaut, and fire fighter. The great thing about each of these dreams was that they were possible. All things were possible. One minute I would be hitting a game winning homerun, and the next I would be flying around the world or saving someone from a burning building. The future seemed limitless. Each day provided new opportunities for my friends and me to play, to try on new roles, to imagine who we would become. Most importantly, it was fun!

As my friends and I grew older things changed. There was school and the challenges it presented, homework, and an endless number of other responsibilities that seem to accumulate with age. It became more difficult to dream limitless dreams. More importantly, the possibilities no longer seemed limitless. Others were more athletic, I did not possess super powers, I was allergic, and a tendency toward motion sickness seemed to rule me out as an astronaut.

At this same time, both my parents and teachers were more focused on my ability to spell and read, and...to sit in my seat. More energy was now being focused on the development of academic, social and life skills. I was learning that I had both strengths and weaknesses, and that in life there are limitations. I was also learning that the ability to dream was not only necessary to imagine new possibilities, but was also necessary in imagining how to get there. My dreams were still large, but were being transformed to include my personal strengths, and strategies to assist me in overcoming my weaknesses. It was the beginning of my journey in discovering who I am and what I could be...and it too was fun.

This experience of learning and self discovery is universal. It is also the most challenging task we face as we grow and develop. It begins in early childhood, hits full-speed in adolescence, and continues throughout our lifetime. Easily influenced by critical words of others, by setbacks and by successes, its momentum is not consistent and it can often be derailed. This is especially true for students with learning differences. For them, the experience of transforming the limitless dreams of early childhood into dreams of personal success can be much more difficult.

Unlike their peers who typically experience a balance of success and failure as they grow and develop, students with learning differences often experience much more adversity than success. Sadly this occurs despite the presence of multiple strengths, as weaknesses are highlighted and deficits limit the ability to shine. With mounting setbacks and limited success to provide balance, it becomes increasingly difficult to dream. As a result, limitations often become the focus of attention rather than dreams of personal possibility. Self discovery is avoided, and the "future" is discussed in terms of fear, dread and anxiety, rather than hope and promise. It's definitely not fun!

Our goal with every student at Humanex Academy is to reawaken these dreams of possibility. To encourage a sense of fun in learning, and to encourage a sense of discovery as each student learns how to work with and around their differences.

In my current role as the child and adolescent psychologist at Humanex Academy, I have had the privilege to work with many students struggling to understand and work with their learning differences. Each comes to the program with a unique combination of strengths and weakness, a history of set backs, and much apprehension for what the future might bring. Most importantly, each also brings a history of dreaming big dreams. For me, the opportunity to work with this aspect of each student is what most excites me!

The naturalist John Muir once said, the power of imagination makes us infinite. To be limitless in scope. Immeasurably more than what one is now. To step beyond one's current circumstances to imagine something better – more fun. This is what our students need, and this is what we all love to bring to our student's lives.

Humanex Academy provides an environment that fosters the ability to dream. For many of our students, adversity related to learning differences will never go away. However, the ability to once again dream big dreams and imagine strategies to overcome areas of weakness, limits their impact. This then opens the door for many personal possibilities and a future that can be full of promise.

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