

The Right Tool for the Job

by Alexandra Shires Golon

Imagine this: You've just tucked your child in for the night and - well, it seems as though you've just tucked him in, but, now that you think about it, the news is coming on and you've managed to fold the laundry, do the dishes, and tidy the family room in the meantime, so maybe it's actually been a *couple of hours* and, and - he's calling for you! ***Why isn't he asleep yet?!***

You've been summoned for one last whisper, snuggle and butterfly kiss. In your attempt to navigate the four feet between the bedroom door and the bedside you manage to plant your unprotected left foot smack on top of a Mars colony created from Legos. (Why are those blasted blocks so painful?!) As you attempt to regain your balance (and refrain from swearing out loud) your right foot lands on and collapses the K'Nex version of the International Space Station. You are clearly losing the navigational battle of your child's bedroom floor and now, on your way to greeting that when-was-the-last-time-this-was-vacuumed-floor with your face, you notice that hurled under the bedframe like so much forgotten dirty laundry, is the homework assignment that was DUE THREE WEEKS AGO!!



Feel free to replace the Legos and K'Nex with puzzles, art or construction materials, books, blocks, marbles, beads, play-doh, ribbons, scissors, stuffed animals, chess pieces, or any number of other items. Then switch the misplaced homework with anything else that nobody but you seems to understand the value and importance of – like, say, homework. If this scenario sounds even remotely like an evening from your life, you are probably the parent of a visual-spatial learner.

Visual-spatial learners are the delightful little darlings (and big darlings, too, seems you can't outgrow this) in our lives who crave for time with such joys as building, painting, drawing, daydreaming, dancing, music making, and letting their creative imaginations soar. They struggle to find the time or inclination to put their clothes away, maintain some degree of organization (at least what passes as organization in the rest of the free world), and you can forget altogether about punctuality. They have the most incredible, "A-Ha!" moments of discovery, invention and problem solving, but the skills of managing a time schedule or showing their work may absolutely elude them. They

march to their own drummer and virtually nothing you do will convince them it may be offbeat.

Is knowing someone's learning style important?

Does it matter whether or not you know your child is a visual-spatial learner? Well, one might just as easily ask, does it matter whether or not you know if they are right- or left-handed? When we know a child is left-handed, we don't insist they use right-handed scissors. We used to, but then we realized that lefties are born that way, that there's nothing wrong with being a leftie and we, the right-handers of the world, finally accepted lefties as they are. When given the proper tool, the task became easier, the job more interesting, and the end result more pleasing.

What if we're not giving the appropriate tools to specific learning styles? If you, your child's teacher, and others involved in this person's life, understand that people can have a preferred learning style, just like having a preferred writing hand, and that you could teach to that preferred learning style, wouldn't you be offering them the same advantage for learning that appropriate scissors are to preferred handedness?

I didn't know people actually thought differently until my son was old enough to describe for me how he thought. For instance, one night as I was tucking him in, I asked him which goodnight song he wanted. He sat straight up in bed and stared intently at the ceiling. "What are you looking at?" I asked. "My song list." "Oh, what does it look like?" He proceeded to "draw" with his finger in the air a sort of shelf holding every picture of every song he knew. He described the images of a number of songs for which he could also find a word, the song's name, to match his image. He could see the song he wanted but couldn't find its name. I asked him to describe the picture: a hand with two fingers up. While I was guessing songs with two items, songs with the number two, anything "two," my hand (with two fingers raised) was bouncing and he got it: Little Bunny FooFoo!! This was not a song I had sung to him in many years, maybe four or more, but the image, the picture he had created of the song, lived on in his mind's eye, on his shelf of songs.

What I discovered about my son's learning style was that he thinks in images. His brain is one gigantic filing system of pictures that symbolize words (like song names!). Visual-spatials, like my son, can often solve complex math equations accurately, but they may not always be able to show their work. They excel in "right-hemispheric" talents, skills requiring aptitude from the right side of the brain: art, geometry, thinking in multiple dimensions, music, creativity, empathy, design and invention, and the sheer joy of creating something wonderful out of the trash *you* nearly threw away.

One evening, after enjoying a take-out meal from a local restaurant, my youngest couldn't wait to get his hands on some tape and the Styrofoam containers our food had been delivered in. He "saw" airplane propellers in the lids, an airplane body in the boxes and all the other pieces required to create his custom jet. They were all there, their potential being wasted just holding our food. When dinner was over, voila, the airplane was created – food crumbs and all! (I'm almost certain it still exists somewhere, probably under his bed!)

Ok, one more story. Once, as we were headed out for some unmemorable chore, and still backing out of the driveway, Visual-Spatial Poster Child was obviously struggling in his seat. "What's up?" I called back. "I can't get the backward seven to

work!” I’m thinking, “backward seven??” – what is it, how does it work and why does he need it? “Uh, what’s a backward seven, honey?” I cautiously asked. Meanwhile, I’m headed down the street and the panic level in his voice is rising. At the stop sign I looked back to discover that he had not been able to connect his seatbelt, which from his vantage point, coupled with his ability to see the image and *not* find the matching word, is clearly a backward seven!

Most people, I have learned, are a little sequential and a little spatial. My oldest, for example, is very strong in both auditory-sequential abilities and visual-spatial abilities. For him, learning comes easily and rapidly. He can grasp complex concepts with little effort regardless of how they are presented. What a gift to be able to call upon the strengths of either or both hemispheres at any given time!

In an effort to meet the needs of children like mine, we parents and teachers must first recognize that there are distinct differences in how many people think and learn that are inherent in each individual, even in our learning styles. Many of us are strongly auditory-sequential or strongly visual-spatial. To require visual-spatial learners to conform to an auditory-sequential structure, in their home and/or school life, is equivalent to the archaic practice of forcing left-handed children to write with their right hand.

Visual-spatial abilities – your child’s gift

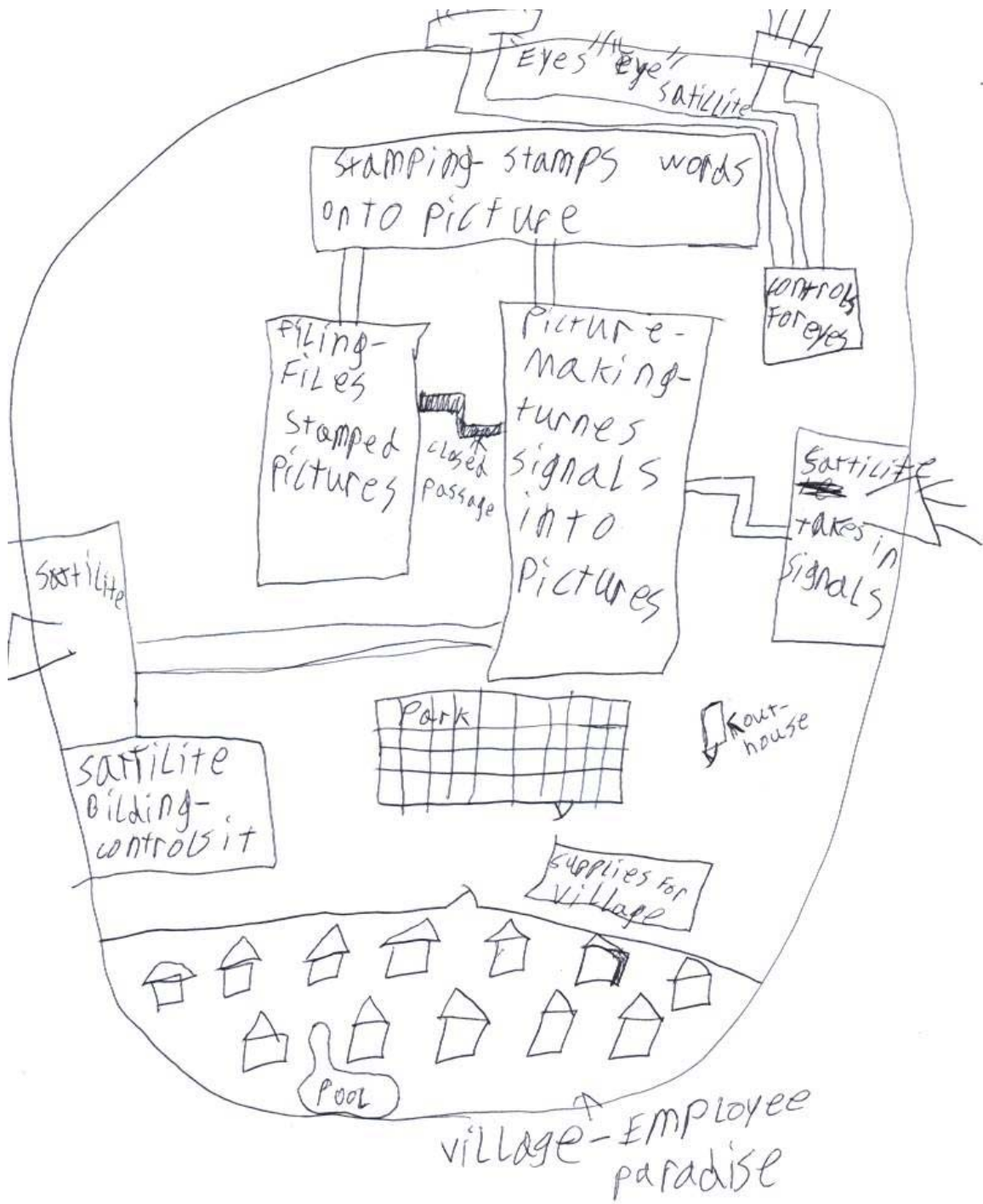
Think you’ve got a visual-spatial on your hands? What do you do now, right? As a homeschooling mom, I have the luxury of creating a classroom that is custom-designed to meet the unique needs of my children and their abilities. Whenever we approach any new learning material, we think about how to present it *visually*. Often my children come up with remarkably effective, visual ways they would like to learn new material. From maps of South America in multiple colors of clay (including transparency overlays of the ancient Aztec, Mayan, and Incan civilizations) to gigantic sheets of butcher paper (to trace the paths of the first Polynesian explorers and Lewis and Clark), we are always incorporating some interesting visual activity to accompany and expand upon our traditional curriculum. You haven’t truly appreciated Shakespeare until you’ve seen us dissect it, diagram it, and create a cartoon version of it!

Visual “props” such as math manipulatives, graphic organizers, the computer, good old paper and crayons, clay, transparencies, mnemonic devices, cartoons, and much more, serve to enhance the overall educational experience for every learner, visual-spatial and auditory-sequential. I’ve never met an auditory-sequential learner who didn’t enjoy squishing and shaping clay to re-create ancient artifacts, but I’ve known several visual-spatial learners who couldn’t recite the dates or the names if they had only learned the information by having it read or lectured to them. They remember what they see, not always what they hear. And for what they hear, they must be allowed time to create a visual image to accompany that new knowledge or it is lost.

Visual-spatial learners learn by observation. At just 20 months I discovered my eldest son “playing” on the computer. He had learned how to manipulate the mouse, get into a document and ask the printer to do its thing just by watching me! I wasn’t teaching him, but he had been on my lap and seen the process maybe two or three times, and he learned it. Today he approaches computers as many kids of his generation do, without any trepidation or concern, fully understanding how it performs pure acts of magic.



The following picture was created when I asked my son to tell me how he was able to learn Spanish so well. (Foreign languages are not typically mastered by visual-spatial learners unless they are involved in a total immersion program.) He proceeded to draw, in great detail, (rather than try to explain!) how his “satellites” (ears) receive information which was then forwarded to the “Picture making building” which transforms the signals into pictures. Those pictures then travel to the “picture stamping” area which “puts what the picture means on” the picture. (Must have missed this step with the Little Bunny FooFoo song!) Finally, the image travels to the “Filing Building” where all images are stored for later recollection. What I particularly enjoyed hearing about was where all the employees (who were responsible for receiving signals, stamping the pictures and filing) lived: Employee Paradise, a fenced-in village complete with swimming pool and small store!



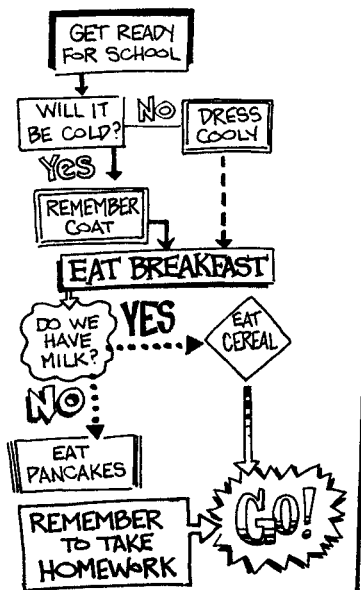
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Successfully harnessing the gift

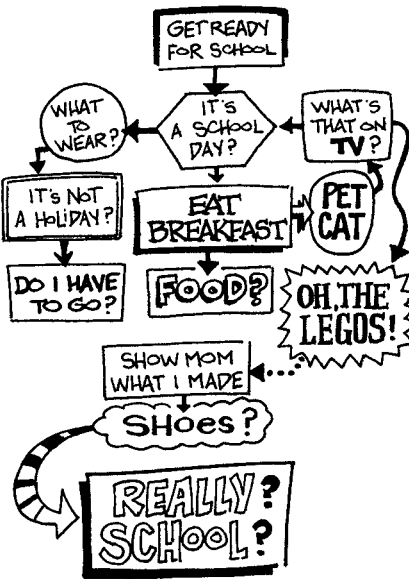
If your child is a visual-spatial learner, one of your jobs as a parent is to work with the classroom teacher to understand and teach to a known preferred learning style. Chances are your child isn't the only visual-spatial in the classroom; studies have shown that at least one-third of the population is visual-spatial. By enriching the learning experience with a more visual, hands-on approach, with activities that *engage* all students, the classroom teacher doesn't sacrifice anyone's learning, only adds to everyone's. If the teacher can reach everybody, nobody falls through the cracks.

At home, take a look at how you communicate with your child. Imagine it's time for the weekly (monthly?) Clean Your Bedroom Or Else ritual. Do you typically rattle off a list of do-this, do-that chores then leave the room believing that your "picture" of a clean living space will somehow manifest itself out of the reigning chaos? And that it will do so within a prescribed timeframe? Now think about your success rate with this approach. Next time, try this: work with your child to create a poster of pictures (either drawings you create together or clippings from magazines) of what the end product, the Never Been Seen Since We Moved In Bedroom, *should* look like when the job is finished. The pictures might include one of a nicely made bed with all the stuffed animals aligned and waiting. Another picture of folded clothes neatly tucked into drawers that are still within the dresser, while another picture shows matching shoes lined up nicely on the floor of the closet. Yet another of similar toys gathered carefully into tubsok, you get the picture. Now help them get the picture.

Getting a visual-spatial child out the door can be an on-going challenge. There are so many distracting and more entertaining options available. One technique that works, at least some of the time, is to create a picture of the consequences of not getting to your destination on time. For example, suppose you are running late to an afternoon Tae Kwon Do practice. You could create the following picture for your child: "If we are late for your class, that will upset the instructor and possibly interrupt the start of the lesson for all the other students who did arrive on time. How do think your instructor will feel? How will the other students feel?" If they can see the consequences of not arriving on time, you may actually stand a chance of getting out the door – and, with the shoes! Assure your child that whatever they were longing to do instead of getting in the car will be there for them when they return. Visualizing what will happen, or not happen, as a result of their action, or inaction, is often an effective way to get results. Also, effective although militaristic sounding, are one word commands, "Shoes – Car - Please" convey all the instructions they need.



Auditory-Sequential

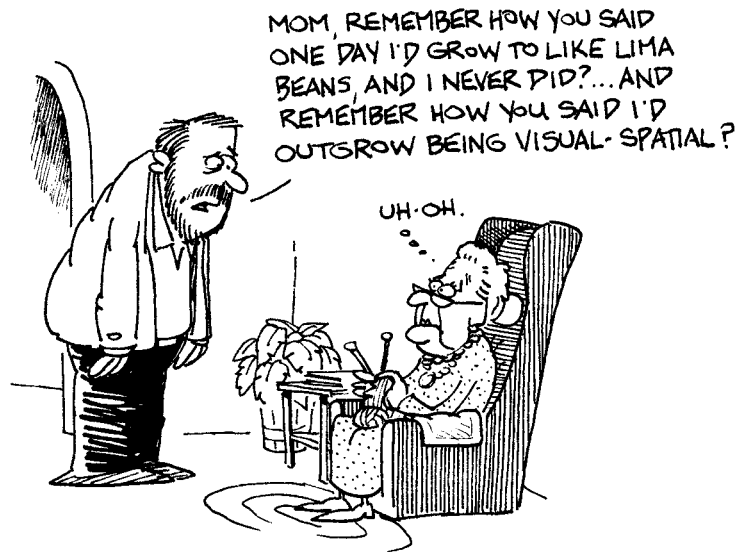


Visual-Spatial

If you are not a visual-spatial learner and your child is, you must try to “see” from his or her perspective. Unless you have created a picture for the visual learner to remember, consider it lost. You could deliver an entire set of instructions regarding the laundry: gather it all, bring it down to the laundry room, sort by colors, fill the washer with detergent, turn on the water, add the bleach, put the clothes in, etc., but if you have not planted the image of the chore’s goal – clean laundry – your child will be stuck envisioning gathering the laundry in a room full of temptations that draw attention completely away from the chore at hand. Once you think you’ve created a picture, ask your child to describe for you what that image is. Make sure you both agree on the “picture” that will result when the chore is complete.

Imagine you are helping your visual-spatial child to master something new. Whether it’s riding a bike or memorizing the multiplication tables, the greatest gift you can give your child is to present that new material visually. I once met an incredibly dynamic teacher who taught the 13 colonies by having his audience memorize a ridiculous story – in pictures that each person drew - of a Jersey cow named Georgia, atop the Empire State Building. Are you “seeing” New Jersey, Georgia and New York here? I taught my sons their times tables by reading them the silliest cartoons that exchanged the names of numbers for characters and other objects. What’s 8 x 2? “Skate times shoe = Sick Queen, Sixteen!” from the cartoon story of a queen spinning dizzily while wearing a shoe on one foot, and a skate on the other. (You can find the entire collection available at www.multiplication.com.) There are a number of math programs out that include presenting material visually including Borenson’s Hands-on Equations, Mortenson Math, Math-U-See and more.

Maybe if we ignore it, they'll outgrow it!



Preferred learning styles don't affect just school-age children! My husband and mother-in-law recently learned there was a name to refer to how they thought and learned. Neither knew that their way of thinking was different from others, they thought everybody learned and thought in images. And, while neither did well in elementary school, both are very bright. Understanding their uniqueness has helped to heal old wounds from their school days and to create confidence in their abilities and contributions.

The future for visual-spatial learners

Parents of visual-spatial learners everywhere, take heart! We are on the eve of an educational revolution and your child's time to shine has come. For the first time in perhaps centuries, their special gifts will be recognized and honored. How can I make such a prediction? Because in this new century, our reliance on the computer and the visually-oriented careers that will spring from it mean the talents that come naturally to the visual-spatial learner will be of highest value. It can be exceedingly challenging for sequential, left-hemispheric thinkers to imagine objects in dimensional form, to create pictures in their mind's eye, to think in terms of space rather than time. But for the visual-spatial learner it is precisely how they think and learn. Perhaps one day, there will be remedial courses in how to think sequentially because the talent for such will have been lost.



Until then, we must honor the visual-spatial learners among us, learn from them, and offer them the tools they need for success in their academic careers, the right tools for the job.

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