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Myths and truths



Does knowing or applying a specific learning style really help your child learn better? Dalena van der Westhuizen, cognitive development specialist, master brain coach and co-founder and MD of BrainAbility, shares what research studies tell us

Has anyone ever told you “I’m an auditory learner” or “My child’s a visual learner”?

It’s a statement I hear on a regular basis and it’s based on a belief in learning styles. The assumption that students have distinct learning styles and learn best through these channels has influenced the way children are taught to study and teachers are taught to teach for decades –

despite a lack of evidence that such styles even exist.

“Identify your child’s learning style” is a topic that’s especially prevalent now, as we approach the halfway mark of another academic year and parents frantically seek ways to understand their children’s learning needs and help them study more easily. It’s also usually the time of year when “learning style assessments” and endless study method



courses “based on your child’s brain profile” (usually a learning style profile or a personality/temperament profile) pop up everywhere.

And year after year, children from pre-school to varsity age are quick to be labelled with a specific “learning style” and given guidelines

on how to study accordingly, supposedly to help them learn more effectively.

Although there are more than 70 different learning style frameworks, here are the most common learning style classifications:

- **Visual learners** – those who learn best by seeing concepts in pictures and diagrams. (So-called



right-brained learners are believed to be among these.)

- **Auditory learners** – those who learn best by hearing/listening. (So-called “**left-brained learners**” are believed to be among these.)

- **Kinesthetic learners** – those who learn best by incorporating movement or hands-on activities.

Why does the notion of learning styles hold such appeal?

On the surface, it makes sense that modifying information to suit an individual’s preferred method of receiving and understanding it will improve learning outcomes.

For many parents, students and even educators, the idea that different people have different learning styles feels right and intuitive (and because they’re often unaware of the cognitive brain processes required for the processing of information – and thus for learning to take place – they completely buy into the learning style craze).

It *feels* right and often ticks many of the boxes about what they’re already observing when their child studies. Therefore, it must *be* right. As a parent, I can certainly understand the appeal of what learning styles promote – a way of understanding how your child prefers to study, which would, in theory, make that a lot easier for both of you.

However, here's the problem:

Does knowing or applying your learning style really help you learn better? Science says “no”.

No matter how hard scientists have looked for evidence of the learning style theory, they've never found any. Indeed, an overwhelming (and ever-growing) number of academics and researchers who study this for a living consider learning styles to be one of the biggest myths in education.

Why? Though we each might have an inherent preference for learning in a specific way, it's our ability to process information (ie the cognitive skills/abilities on which we rely) that ultimately determines how successfully we truly digest and comprehend that information.

Cognitive skills are the core skills your brain uses to learn, read, plan, remember, reason, think on your feet and pay attention.



Each of our cognitive skills plays an important role in processing information. Research studies and MRI scanning shows that multiple areas in our brains, and on both sides of it, are simultaneously processing (lighting up) when we work with information.

Although a student who has stronger visual processing skills, for instance, might prefer visual study methods to learn, theoretically making them a “visual learner”, the reality is that while studying or working in any way

with information, that student relies on all their cognitive brain functions to work together in order to successfully process, store, recall and apply the information.

This means that if even one of your cognitive skills is weak, no matter what kind of information is coming your way or which preferred learning style or study method you're using, grasping, retaining or using that information is impacted.

While studying according to your preferred learning style might make a difference in the short term, as it feels more natural and in line with your personality/temperament, it does nothing to change or improve the way your brain's able to process the information.

Therefore insight into your individual cognitive profile – before applying any learning style or study method – would yield much better long-term benefits.

COGNITIVE SKILLS AND LEARNING

