



Relight the Candle

Five-year-old Tommy walked over to his mother, Judy. 'Write my name for me, Mommy.'

"Tommy, you know how to write your name."

"But I don't 'member," he said.

Tommy's mother, Judy, phoned me, near tears, about this conversation. Judy's concern was that Tommy had forgotten something as seemingly simple as the three letters in Tom

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"What do you think? Should I call my pediatrician? Do you think Tom has brain damage from falling off his bicycle two weeks ago? Should we get an MRI? A CAT scan?"

"Judy," I said, "I don't think there is probably anything serious going on. I think what you are seeing is a normal part of learning. The candle blew out. Tommy just needs to review and relearn how to write his name. It's very normal for children to forget things we think they have learned."

As learning occurs we take in information though our senses and retrieve this information through the memory process. The first time we encounter information doesn't mean we'll remember or retain it. How many repetitions does it take to learn a new phone number?

(Safety note: Cell phones seem to make learning phone numbers obsolete. Every five-year-old should know by heart his or her address and key phone numbers--home, parent's work, grandparents, etc.)

Some of us can hear a number or look at it once and have it in firmly in memory. For others it may take over a hundred repetitions. Learning theory suggests that most learning requires two hundred or more repetitions.

The process of retrieving facts from memory after they have been learned is another obstacle to a person's performance.

For example, I used to know my chocolate chip cookie recipe without hesitation since I made them a couple of times a week. (Oops! My secret is out.) In the past three or four years, though, I've made a batch only once. As I pulled out the mixing bowl my mind went black. Use it or lose it they say. How true it is for youngsters...and us older youngsters.

The more ways we can use information the better able we are to quickly access that information. When we can involve our hands in the memory and retrieval process, long-term learning is helped.

Repetition is a vital key to learning and the young child

before the age of six enjoys doing the same activity over and over. How many times can a three-year old watch a favorite video? No number that large? Repetition is how the child creates memory and retrieval skills. Sameness creates a sense of order in the child's mind.

Children over the age of six are more adult like in their learning and demand variety in the presentation of information being acquired. How many times do adults like to watch a movie?

Skill building weaves in and out of our memories, flickering at the flame of knowledge. At times due to factors in brain development not entirely understood, this flame grows faint or is extinguished. At these times we need to patiently present previously learned information to the child--perhaps dozens of times. At some point, the information will be firmly set in the child's mind and will be remembered and easily retrieved.

The thousands of skills your child is acquiring take hundreds of repetitions each to become well established in the mind. Knowledge and skills will come and go as these hundreds of thousands of repetitions occur. Be patient and kind, and relight the candle. Make sure you have a big box of matches.