



## Research Briefs

### Think Your Child is a Visual or Auditory Learner? Think Again.

When looking at various programs or schools for your child, you may come across discussions of various programs being taught with different learning styles. The idea of different people having different learning styles has become increasingly popular. In fact, there are a great many educational products being marketed to help match individuals with their specific learning style. You may hear people say things such as, "I am a visual learner," implying that they learn better when the material is taught visually rather than verbally.

Do different people actually have different learning styles? With so many people talking as if they do, and so many products available surrounding learning style differences, the apparent answer is that they must exist! However, a team of top learning researchers recently reviewed the research literature, seeking (or "searching for") any support—or any disconfirmation—for learning style differences.

In examining the research findings, it is important to differentiate learning *styles* from learning *preferences*. A learning preference is a method of instruction someone *likes*; a learning style is typically interpreted as a method of instruction that is most effective for someone. Obviously, different people like different ways of learning. But, this does not mean that being in an educational environment that matches your preference leads to more effective learning.

To test whether there was research support for learning styles, the team of researchers looked for evidence showing greater improvement in achievement when learning preference matched teaching method, compared to when learning preference and teaching method did not match. The question is, did people who claimed to be visual learners actually learn more effectively when taught visually than verbal learners did?

What they found is rather surprising! Despite hundreds of research articles and books having been published on the topic of learning styles, they found only one study that provided this kind of finding in support of learning styles effects. In fact, they found numerous studies with negative results, showing that performance did not improve when the teaching method matched the learning preference.

The authors conclude that although the negative findings don't close the book on learning styles, any application of learning styles in the classroom is not warranted based on current evidence. Instead, they propose greater emphasis be put on implementing teaching methods that have been shown to help all students learn. Moreover, they note that given the ability for people to learn, it is important that parents and schools not eliminate potential avenues of learning through beliefs that they can only learn in particular settings or ways.

—Matthew C. Makel

Matthew Makel is a Gifted Education Research Specialist at Duke TIP and the editor of DGL.

## Further Reading

Pashler, H., McDaniel, M., Rohrer, D., & Bjork, R. (2009). Learning styles: concepts and evidence. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 9, 105-119.

Duke University TIP. 1121 West Main Street, Durham, NC 27701-2028. Phone: (919) 668-9100. Fax: (919) 681-7921. Visit the [contact us](#) page if you have questions.  
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