

Specialist Learning Centre Wiltshire

I work in a small Specialist Learning Centre with children aged from 4 to 9 years old. The children in my class have moderate to severe learning difficulties. Amongst those children there are two children with Down syndrome one of whom also has ADHD, one child with Autism and the rest have global delay or are puzzling medics everywhere!

All of the children have significant speech and language difficulties and we use a great deal of Makaton signing and visual prompts to support our communication. The children are all working within the mid to high P levels for all of the different National Curriculum. I have been using the Stern equipment with the children for roughly 18 months. The counting board is out in the classroom all of the time as part of our number area and the rest of the equipment comes out for specific teaching or for exploration. Many of the children in the class have difficulties with dexterity and spatial awareness but the Counting Board and the Pattern Boards have helped them enormously.

The children are taking on board the language that is associated with the lessons and the learning style and as well as using and responding to it in the structured sessions, they are demonstrating an understanding of the language by using it themselves in less structured activities. The children enjoy using the equipment and have built up a good understanding of how to use the Counting Board, the Pattern Boards and the number blocks. We do not use the equipment exclusively and we often combine our number work with other counting equipment. We generally work as a group to use the equipment although it has been used on a one to one basis.

It has allowed me to assess through observation the children's understanding of different mathematical concepts such as number order, size relationships and counting despite them not always having the language needed to convey understanding. Their cognitive development has been particularly easy to assess through their ability to problem solve with equipment such as the number bond trays and counting blocks and fitting the blocks in. We often do this activity as a class which also brings in turn taking. The children really respond well to the use of colour and the reliability of the different blocks fitting into their slots and holes. Stern has provided them with a secure structured learning system where trial and error results in success. It has helped to improve their understanding of number, and sequencing, their counting skills, their colour recognition, understanding and comparing of sizes and their dexterity.

The children like using the equipment, they like the practical and fail safe approach to learning. They enjoy the structured learning times (each for a different length of time!) but they also enjoy exploring the equipment in their own way, without boundaries. The most successful piece of equipment for both structured teaching and unstructured exploration so far, is the main Counting Board. Many of the children enjoy taking out the pieces, putting them in, taking them out again, putting them back in...! The children enjoy exploring addition by trying small blocks in large spaces. The wooden Pattern Boards are also excellent for similar reasons. The piece of equipment we use least is the pyramid of number bond 1 - 9 trays because the children are not yet ready for that level of working. However, I know that the equipment is still very effective. I simply cannot fault this system of learning for mathematics. It is interesting to look at and play with, it is carefully structured for specific learning, it uses small and simple steps for progression of learning, and it promotes learning in so many different areas of mathematics. The teaching book gives clear and easy to use lesson outlines, but the equipment is also flexible enough to be used in many other ways.

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Central Wiltshire