

Children with learning difficulties are often confused about why they are different and can't do things. They can find themselves on a downward spiral of underachievement

Jane Hughes discovers how 'Brain Gym' can help

At nine years old, Richard King was two years behind his classmates. Yet he was getting no extra support with his reading and writing work, and his mother, Lesley, could see the pressures of his situation were making him increasingly depressed. When teachers suggested Richard was lazy, Lesley was so frustrated she took him out of school.

"I had no idea what Richard was struggling with until I began to work with him at home," she says. "I discovered his ability to read and spell was inconsistent. Sometimes he couldn't recognise words that he had read before and – although he had a strong grasp of vocabulary and ideas – he found it hard to transfer what was in his mind on to paper."

Lesley took Richard to a specialist who confirmed that he was dyslexic, and also that he had attention deficit disorder and mixed laterality (a condition often accompanying dyslexia, where learning is slowed because there is no clearly dominant side of the brain). Subsequently, a cranial osteopath found that Richard had a compression on the left side of

his skull – possibly from moulding in the uterus – which could have influenced his brain's development and his processing of information.

Then an educational kinesiologist trained in a technique called Brain Gym offered to help. Brain Gym uses simple physical movements to increase the effectiveness of the brain by coaxing the left and right hemispheres to work together.

The kinesiologist asked Richard to read a passage from a book and then do one of the movements, then read the passage again. "I couldn't believe the difference," says Lesley. "The first time, Richard struggled over the words, but after the exercise he was fluent and full of expression."

Brain Gym, developed by American educationalist Dr Paul Dennison, himself dyslexic, is taught by the Educational Kinesiology Foundation in Britain and is used increasingly in schools. The exercises are designed to improve co-ordination and balance, and strengthen neural connections to help concentration and learning. Lesley decided to train in Brain Gym to do the exercises with Richard. Within a year, he was back in school.

Now 15, he is no longer considered dyslexic, and will be taking nine GCSEs next summer. Meanwhile, Lesley, a homoeopath, joined forces with a cranial osteopath and a counsellor to set up Kaleidoscope, a six-month holistic programme. "Children with learning difficulties are often confused about why they are different and why they can't do things," she says. "They can find themselves on a downward spiral of underachievement, as emotional stress affects their ability to learn, while falling behind at school lowers their self-esteem."

Kaleidoscope, based in East Sussex, aims to remove any past blocks, such as birth trauma, so that children will get the optimum benefit from Brain Gym. Programmes are structured around the needs of each child. Cranial osteopathy is said to release strain patterns in the body that affect the development of the brain, while homoeopathy addresses the physical,

emotional and mental causes of imbalance.

Parents are also given nutritional advice and counselling support so that they can help their children to change.

"The paucity of NHS services for children with learning difficulties means that children may begin to carry the accumulated frustration and misery of the whole family with them," says Dr Kathryn Vale, a psychiatrist, GP, and trustee of Kaleidoscope.

"Brain Gym does require commitment, but when children feel happier and more self-confident, everything they do is enhanced."

One child who progressed dramatically at Kaleidoscope is six-year-old Daniel Heath. Born with his windpipe connected to his oesophagus, Daniel had several early corrective operations, and suffered from repeated chest infections. He stopped breathing completely on several occasions, and doctors think the lack of oxygen may have slowed his development. "It took Daniel a



Daniel Heath, six, was helped by Brain Gym exercises

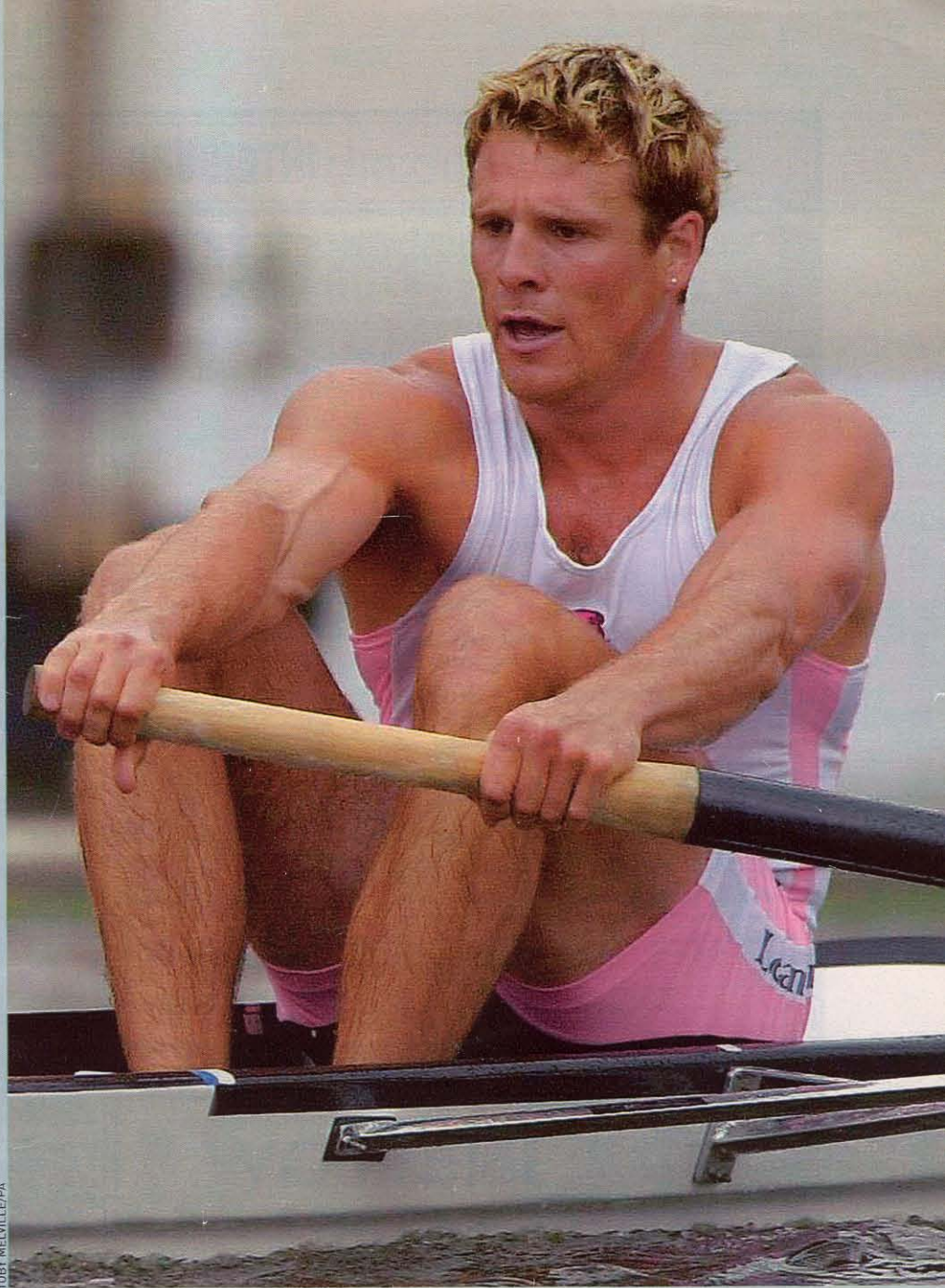
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The fear of empty spaces Poor

you

long time to learn how to do things," says his mother, Lyn. "At five, his speech pattern was similar to that of a three-year-old. He was less co-ordinated than his peers and found it difficult to run, jump and balance."

Within a month of starting at Kaleidoscope, his parents – who were doing the Brain Gym exercises daily with Daniel at home – noticed a difference. "He began to speak in longer sentences and was much more aware of what was going on around him," says Lyn. Gradually, his physical co-ordination improved to the point where he is now able to ride a bike, kick a football and run and climb with his friends. His reading ability leapt forward, and he now writes in a straight line. "We were surprised at how quickly he picked things up in the first couple of months and how assertive he became," says Lyn. ●

For more information on the Kaleidoscope programme, call 01424 441397. For an information pack on Brain Gym, send a £3 cheque payable to EKF, to The Educational Kinesiology Foundation, 12 Golders Rise, London NW4 2HR



TOBY MELVILLE/PA

REGIMEN

James Cracknell, 30, rower

Weight: 15st 10lb
Height: 6ft 4in

People say that rowing is the toughest sport of all. Is your routine tough?

Every morning I do 20km rowing, a 30-minute run and 90 minutes of weights. After lunch it's an hour on the rowing machine and an hour back on the water.

The method behind such an arduous schedule?

We base our training on a percentage of the time the coach thinks will be needed to win the gold medal in Athens 2004. On short rows we train at speeds faster than the world record.

Do you always train with your rowing partner Matthew Pinsent?

No, sometimes we train separately and with other rowers. It's boring to train with the same guy all the time.

Do you have a team race tactic?

Having rowed together in the fours we know how each other's mind works.

In a race we mix sprints with rhythmic rowing, and aim to hit the line with no energy left. We make sure that we're hurting ourselves.

What sort of diet fuels your training?

Not a particularly healthy one. I can burn

off most of what I eat. It's probably an area we could improve on. I always look to eat even if I'm not hungry so I'm ready for the next training session. My girlfriend complains that because I eat so much, she eats a lot too and puts on weight.

Do you have a calorie threshold?

I'm supposed to eat 6,000 calories a day. I cut down nearer the race day, as there's no point in carrying a tub of lard downstream.

What's 6,000 calories in food terms?

A big breakfast, a three-course lunch, three litres

of water and Lucozade, a sandwich, an evening meal and a bowl of cereal before bed.

How important is weight to a rower?

Crucial. An extra three kilos in the boat is meant to account for a fifth of a second, and we won the Olympics by two-fifths of a second and the world championships by a fiftieth of a second.

Before the Olympic final we analysed our performance and felt that we could lose some weight. Between us we lost 16kg. If we hadn't done that we probably would have lost. ●

Nick Wyke

The World Rowing Championships in Seville are live on BBC1 from September 15

5 MINUTE FIX

Rub a dab of moisturiser in your palms and run them through your hair to smooth any stray strands