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Section: LIFESTYLE

Salisbury author writes a story for every style of learning

Barbara Esham has an IQ of 130, but often gets lost while driving. She mastered high-level math with ease, but has trouble remembering basic spelling rules. She calls herself "spicy" -- a term she created to describe exceptionally smart people who aren't exceptionally good at everything.

"We each have a 'style' -- everyone has a style," said Esham. "(I think) it is important to let children know that no one is perfect, in fact, far from perfect."

Based on her own learning experiences and the education of her three "spicy" daughters, Esham created a series of children's books called "The Adventures of Everyday Geniuses," stories designed to show kids that "smart" comes in many different forms. Eight-year-old Katie, for example, is shocked to learn that her brilliant father can't spell Mississippi; third-grader Max is the brainiest boy in math class, but panics during timed tests.

"These themes just seem to run through the early grades at school," said Esham. "And I think kids enter kindergarten ready to perform; 'Spell this word correctly,' 'Print these letters correctly.' We have so many books (on learning styles) available to adults, to educators and parents, but there aren't any books available to children."

Esham, a first-time author, knew she was on to something when she tested the book ideas with her daughters. "They kept asking questions about the stories and they were saying, 'Well, so-and-so in my class has difficulty with that.' "

Encouraged by the girls' enthusiasm, Esham sent four unedited manuscripts to psychiatrist Dr. Edward Hallowell, a best selling author who writes extensively on attention-deficit disorder and learning differences.

"He said, 'I love it, I'm on board,' " said Esham. "It gave me the confidence to move forward with it and take the risk."

This year, Esham has published "If You're So Smart, How Come You Can't Spell Mississippi?," "Last to Finish, A Story about the Smartest Boy in Math Class," "Stacey

Coolidge's Fancy-Smancy Cursive Handwriting" and "Mrs. Gorski, I Think I Have the Wiggle Fidgets."

"I feel very fortunate that I have enough people around me to let down their guard and share the same things," said Esham. "Other parents tell me, 'She's having difficulty with math,' or 'His handwriting is atrocious' -- it's universal, it really is."

Each book includes a note to parents, such as this one in "Last to Finish" -- "Math facts and memorization are learning obstacles for many everyday geniuses. Rote math skills have little to do with potential aptitude for more advanced math. Albert Einstein would have agreed."

"We don't hear that (Thomas) Edison attempted something 2,000 times before he got it right, or that Charles Schwab had a third-grade reading level at Stanford," said Esham. "I set (the books) up in a way that there's a message for the child, a message for the parent and the peripheral visual humor will keep the child engaged."

The "Genius" series is already getting national attention, winning a Parents' Choice Award and a Reading Rockets recommendation. Esham has been invited to speak at a number of conferences including the National Association for Gifted Children in October.

"And three educational distributors have picked it up, which is exciting because educators are asking for it," said Esham.

She is drafting four new books scheduled for release in 2010.

"There is one on the dreaded science fair and the title of that one is 'Keep Your Eye on the Prize.' And there's another one called 'Stop, Drop, Look at the "Leaves' which is about being overscheduled and basically living in the car. It opens with, 'Mom, is this water old?' So that one is a lot of fun, too."

One of the books will feature Jack Horner, a renowned paleontologist who has given Esham permission to incorporate his struggle with dyslexia into one of her stories.

"So there's really no shortage of topics," said Esham. "You know the next great mind could just be that C student."

For more information on Esham's books, visit www.mainstreamconnections.org.