It's not the childr

A school in Surrey shows how misguided the Govern

'Learning difficulties" is a phrase often regarded as a euphemism for stupid. Such an attitude leads to a serious misunderstanding of the impairment from which so many children suffer — accompanied by a failure to treat it.

Suppose a child is far behind in reading, reluctant to talk, easily distracted, unable to follow instructions, needs everything to be repeated, never seems to get the point - has difficulty, in short, in understanding the world. From the age of seven or eight, he - it is much more often he than she - is in the bottom group at school, failing to thrive, inattentive, withdrawn, perhaps being bullied, perhaps aggressive, lacking in self-esteem and a concern to parents and teachers.

What do you conclude? That he has a low IQ? That nothing much can be done? That tolerance and containment are the best that can be hoped for?

You might well be driven to that conclusion by the Government's policy of forcing children with learning difficulties to remain in mainstream schools - where teachers aren't equipped to deal with them - in the interests of "inclusion".

But suppose the child's learning difficulties have nothing to do with his IQ. Suppose that his difficulties can be overcome by skilled intervention. And suppose he's your child: wouldn't you fight to save him - not just from the misery of school, but from the real likelihood of a ruined life?

That is what the parents of children at More House School, near Farnham, Surrey, have done. Their reward has been to see their children's lives transformed.

Here, in one of only a handful of schools of its kind, are 220 boys aged nine to 18 who have all been diagnosed as having one or more of attention deficit disorder (with or without hyperactivity), dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, autistic spectrum disorder and

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Minor miracle: lessons at More House, whose pupils had been written off as ineducable

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nment's obsession with 'inclusion' really is, says **John Clare**

"specific learning difficulty".

The boys are of average intelligence, with IQs of between 95 and 110. Yet, before they arrived at More House, most had been written off as all but ineducable and those that weren't soon would have been if they had remained in mainstream schools.

At the heart of this minor miracle is the school's speech and language therapy department, where the language processing problems that are the cause of the pupils' learning difficulties are identified and treated.

These are children who don't hear every word in a sentence, are confused by subordinate clauses, have difficulty understanding abstract concepts, struggle to arrange events in a logical sequence, are poor at making inferences, have trouble working out what to remember and what to discard, and, to their fury, cannot always express what they know.

With skilled teaching, they can, however, learn - something that before they came here no one apparently had understood.

Take Kurt: severe language processing problems unidentified by his teachers; frustration and aggression leading to repeated exclusions, a three-year absence from school and assignment to a pupil referral unit. After a long battle with the local education authority, his mother got him into More House. Now he has six GCSEs at grade C or above and is taking three AS-levels.

Take Joe: poor verbal comprehension that was never addressed. He arrived at 13, illiterate, hyperactive, angry and "known to the police". Now he is taking a full range of GCSEs and wants to become a carpenter.

"He has an excellent visual memory and we taught him to visualise what's being said to him," says Meriel Davenport, his language therapist.

Take Alex. "I'd always had problems with school," he says. "No one could figure out what was wrong. They said I was lazy, they said I was thick. Then I came here." Alex is now taking three A-levels and aims to be a sports journalist.,

More House's triumph lies not just in identifying the hidden causes of its pupils' handicaps, but in the extraordinarily high quality of its teaching — lucid, multi-sensory (telling reinforced by doing and showing), painstaking and endlessly patient.

No wonder parents fight to get their sons in here — and how they have to fight. Ninety of the pupils have official statements of their special educational needs that prescribe More House as the only solution to their complex problems and commit the local education authority to paying the fees: £11,000 a year for day pupils, £17,000 for boarders; speech and language therapy extra.

Behind each of these statements lie years of argument, frustration and frightening legal bills. Many other parents have fought and lost and must pay the fees themselves.

"When I took over 11 years ago, it was enough to show that a child was three years behind in a mainstream school," says Barry Huggett, the head of More House. "Now, with the advent of 'inclusion', getting an appropriate statement is becoming tougher every year. Yet the truth is that the children who've been here have an infinitely better chance of being included in society."

A report published last week by the Dyslexia Institute estimated that the cost to the British economy of unrecognised dyslexia, in terms of poor literacy and basic skills and the sufferers' high incidence in the prison population, was £1 billion a year.