



FAMILY

Learning Disabilities

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Quick Facts...

National law mandates free testing and teaching designed to meet specific needs of learning disabled (LD) children.

Learning disabled children are of average or above average intelligence yet many fail subjects at school.

Children with LDs sometimes show behavioral and emotional problems in addition to school achievement problems. They often have low self-esteem.

Because of criticism at home and during school years, many LD children are doomed to failure. Early diagnosis of learning disabilities is critical to each child's success.

Identifying a learning disabled (LD) child is difficult since each has a unique cluster of learning problems. Public Law 94-142, The Education of All Handicapped Children Act, defines LD children as those who have at least normal intelligence, normal hearing and eyesight, and normal (as opposed to disadvantaged) home and family lives. Learning disabled children usually receive good school instruction but may have difficulty passing basic school subjects.

No one really knows how many people are affected with learning disabilities, but estimates of the U.S. school-aged population range from 2 to 30 percent. There are no similar estimates as to the number of LD adults in the United States because learning disabilities can be subtle and go undetected.

Although this complex issue has been studied by professionals in medicine, psychology and education, there is no agreed upon cause or explanation. Professionals do agree, however, that although the LD child has the ability to learn, some type of neurological dysfunction inhibits this ability and produces an uneven pattern of intellectual growth. This uneven pattern of brain growth interferes with receiving, processing and responding to information.

Learning disabled children seem to have problems with the learning process. An LD child may be able to memorize facts when hearing them through the spoken word, but unable to memorize them when reading. Another child may memorize facts but be unable to translate that knowledge onto paper due to writing, spelling or concentration difficulties. Therefore, each LD child requires highly specialized teaching methods and can learn at an acceptable rate only when an educational program is designed to meet his or her specific needs.

There are many characteristics common to learning disabled children. It is important to understand that all children exhibit some of these characteristics at some time during their normal development. The difference, though, is that LD children usually have several of these characteristics that don't disappear with advancing age. In addition, they often perform erratically and inconsistently in school.

By the time children are teen-agers, their frustration often leads to low levels of self esteem. Low self esteem, combined with continual failure, creates a negative attitude about school and authority figures.

What Are Learning Disabilities?

Three all-encompassing names for these disorders are learning disabilities, dyslexia and minimal brain dysfunction. The following list briefly describes the more common characteristics of learning disabilities.

Attention: The most common type of learning disability is difficulty keeping attention focused. Children with this characteristic are easily distracted, have short attention spans, and continually tune in and tune out what goes on

around them. This leads to inconsistent performance from hour to hour, day to day or week to week. Some parents and teachers mistake this for daydreaming.

Language: This learning disability is characterized by difficulty interpreting verbal instructions. Children with this disability have trouble remembering things they have heard and find it difficult to express themselves verbally. Reading comprehension often is affected as well.

Spatial orientation: Some children have difficulty processing visual information that often results in poor reading or spelling skills. They may reverse letters (“p” for “g” or “was” for “saw”) or speak and write words or syllables in the wrong order — “Please up hurry,” “nuclear” for “unclear” or “pasghetti” for “spaghetti.”

Memory: Children who find it difficult to memorize may be able to remember specific information but unable to retrieve it from memory. For example, one moment LD children might know a fact and the next moment they may not. This characteristic often is the most exasperating to parents and teachers, whose reactions contribute to the child’s own beliefs of being “dumb” or stupid. Some evidence indicates that this behavior is more common in boys than girls. This becomes more noticeable as they grow older because upper grades increasingly require quick recall of stored information.

Fine motor control: Some LD children have trouble coordinating their small muscles for movement. These children have difficulty forming letters quickly and easily and have trouble controlling a pencil. Their handwriting often is illegible. Excellent ideas often get lost in their struggles to actually write because they can’t translate quickly enough from head to paper.

Sequencing: LD children with this type of disorder are unable to understand or perform a series of steps in the correct order. They have difficulty following directions, have trouble with math, and can’t seem to organize their time or school materials. They are slow to learn the days of the week or months in order; telling time may be difficult.

Behavioral and Emotional Characteristics

Motivation: Children who show a lack of intellectual curiosity and motivation may be learning disabled. Their typical response to questions often is “I don’t care.”

Low frustration-tolerance: Some LD children understand and grasp general concepts but get confused with details. The harder these children try to concentrate, the more fatigued they become. This frustration often leads to acting out or disruptive behavior in the classroom or at home.

Impulse control: Some LD children need immediate gratification. Therefore, they have a tendency to do bad things impulsively, even though they are not bad people. They want results now and often resort to questionable methods in order to attain them quickly. These children also are sometimes unable to accurately read the environment and people around them and are frequently at a loss to identify their own problems and needs. This can lead to setting unrealistic priorities and goals or persisting with a behavior that is antagonizing to some around them.

These characteristics can lead to low levels of self confidence. Over the years, accumulated negative images persuade LD children to think of themselves as losers. Parents and teachers often label LD children as lazy, irresponsible or unmotivated. They are, of course, none of these things. In fact, their brains may be more highly specialized than those of the average person. Thus, children who have difficulty learning in one area may have talent in another and may, with love and support, be able to use that strength to compensate for their disability. The earlier a learning disability can be detected, the better. However, it is never too

late to help those with learning disabilities achieve full use of their intellectual abilities.

How Parents and Teachers Can Help

Parents who suspect their child is learning disabled can help by contacting their child's school and their family doctor. They should persist until they've learned the facts about their child's learning disability and should not accept reassurances and excuses such as, "Maybe he's just immature," or "Let's wait and see." Public Law 94-142 states that all children have the right to a free series of tests to determine if a handicapping condition exists. The law also states that children are entitled to have an Individual Educational Program (IEP) designed for them if tests confirm such a condition. A school system that cannot provide appropriate services is required to pay tuition to a private school for children with learning disabilities. Parents can familiarize themselves with this law by obtaining a copy of *The Rights of Parents and the Responsibilities of Schools* by James G. Meade, Educator Publishing Service, Inc., 75 Moulton Street, Cambridge, MA 02138.

The goal of PL 94-142 is to provide help for LD children in the least restrictive setting. Based on the results of evaluations and tests, teams consisting of the LD children's teachers, testers, learning specialists, school counselors or psychologists, and parents are formed in order to design IEPs that can include one of four options:

- a modified program in the regular classroom;
- a regular class placement with supplemental tutoring, remedial instruction, counseling or therapy;
- placement in a special class; or
- placement in a special school.

Treating Learning Disabilities

There are many interventions or strategies to assist LD children but the most important and most fundamental is parental and teacher support. Encouraging children, by focusing on their strengths while minimizing their weaknesses, is essential. Parents can expect LD children to make progress while they assure them that their struggles are understood. Adults cannot expect a cure overnight. They can, however, expect gradual improvement in children's performances over long periods of time and can reward each step of their progress. For example, if children have poor small motor coordination that makes handwriting difficult, teachers can allow them to record reports and assignments on tape recorders. Then they can turn in the tape or transcribe the tape by using a typewriter or word processor. If children have sequencing problems, teachers may give fewer instructions at one time or distribute examples of correctly solved math problems so the children can see solutions as a whole rather than trying to remember the order in which the problem was meant to be solved. If one strategy doesn't work, another can be tried until a solution unique to each LD child is found.

Interventions outside the classroom may include tutoring, psychological counseling and parental help with homework. Approach miracle cures, such as special diets, visual training, specific drugs or megavitamins, with caution. There is no scientific evidence that these work and they can delay finding more suitable interventions.

Where To Go For Help

School personnel often need professional help to understand that some cases are difficult to detect and treat. If LD children don't improve immediately

after intervention, some staff members may feel they are not really trying and accuse the families of spoiling their children. Teachers often will accept the word of another professional over a parent. If asked, professionals specializing in assessments will test children suspected of LDs, supply written reports, and even accompany parents to meetings of school personnel.

Parents also need the help of professionals to accept that they are not responsible for their children's learning disabilities (see Additional Resources.)

Learning disabilities have been called the hidden handicap. Thousands of children struggle with repeated school failure and social rejection because their problems aren't understood. They are burdened with labels such as lazy, dumb and hopeless. Teaching an LD child can be exasperating and frustrating. However, it also can be exciting and challenging and offer parents and teachers a chance to use their imaginations. As children begin to understand how they think and learn, they often arrive at their own methods of compensation, making them feel proud and worthwhile.

If learning disabled children are not overwhelmed by excessive criticism and low self-esteem in early life, they can grow to become exceptional adults. They are, after all, in good company. Famous people who succeeded in spite of learning disabilities include Hans Christian Andersen, author of *The Ugly Duckling*, and Thomas Alva Edison, inventor of the phonograph and electric light bulb.

Additional Resources

Organizations to contact for further information:

Association for Children and Adults with Learning Disabilities, 4156 Library Road, Pittsburgh, PA 15234

Colorado Association for Children and Adults with Learning Disabilities, 7110 S. Eudora Ct., Denver, CO 80233 (303) 740-9638

Colorado Association for Children with Learning Disabilities, P.O. Box 1506, Denver, CO 80201

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), 1920 Association Drive, Beston, VA 22091

Foundation for Children with Learning Disabilities (FCLD), 99 Park Ave., New York, NY 10016

The Orton Dyslexia Society 8415 Bellona Ln., Towson, MD 21204

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