

Learning Disability Defined

The term "learning disability" describes a neurobiological disorder in which a person's brain works or is structured differently. These differences interfere with a person's ability to think and remember. Learning disabilities can affect a person's ability to speak, listen, read, write, spell, reason, recall, organize information, and do mathematics.

Because learning disabilities cannot be seen, they often go undetected. Recognizing a learning disability is even more difficult because the severity and characteristics vary.

A learning disability can't be cured or fixed; it is a lifelong issue. With the right support and intervention, however, children with learning disabilities can succeed in school and go on to successful, often distinguished careers later in life. Parents can help children with learning disabilities achieve such success by encouraging their strengths, knowing their weaknesses, understanding the educational system, working with professionals and learning about their strategies for dealing with specific difficulties.

Facts About Learning Disabilities

Fifteen percent of the U.S. population, or one in seven Americans, has some type of learning disability, according to the National Institutes of Health.

Difficulty with basic reading and language skills are the most common learning disabilities. As many as 80% of students with learning disabilities have reading problems. Learning disabilities often run in families.

Learning disabilities should not be confused with other disabilities such as mental retardation, autism, deafness, blindness, and behavioral disorders. None of these conditions are learning disabilities. In addition, they should not be confused with lack of educational opportunities like frequent changes of schools or attendance problems. Also, children who are learning English do not necessarily have a learning disability.

Attention disorders, such as Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and learning disabilities often occur at the same time, but the disorders are not the same.

Common Learning Disabilities

Dyslexia - a language based disability, in which a person has trouble understanding words, sentences, or paragraphs.

Dyscalculia - a mathematical disability in which a person has a difficult time solving arithmetic problems and grasping math concepts.

Dysgraphia - a writing disability in which a person finds it hard to form letters or write within a defined space.

Auditory and Visual Processing Disabilities - sensory disability in which a person has difficulty understanding language despite normal hearing and vision.

Attention Deficit Disorder - is an inability to control behavior as a result of difficulty in processing sensory stimuli. There are two types of attention deficit disorder:

1. ADHD - refers to children with hyperactivity.
2. ADD - refers to children with inattentiveness without hyperactivity.

What are Some Common Signs of Learning Disabilities?

The good news about learning disabilities is that scientists are learning more every day. Their research provides hope and direction. If parents, teachers, and other professionals discover a child's learning disability early and provide the right kind of help, it can give the child a chance to develop skills needed to lead a successful and productive life. A recent National Institutes of Health Study showed that 67% of young students who were at risk for reading difficulties became average or above average readers after receiving help in the early grades. Parents are often the first to notice that "something doesn't seem right." If you are aware of the common signs of learning disabilities, you will be able to recognize potential problems early. The following is a checklist of characteristics that may point to a learning disability. Most people will, from time to time, see one or more of these warning signs in their children. This is normal. If, however, you see several of these characteristics over a long period of time, consider the possibility of a learning disability.

Preschool

- Ø Speaks later than most children
- Ø Pronunciation problems
- Ø Slow vocabulary growth, often unable to find the right word
- Ø Difficulty rhyming words
- Ø Trouble learning numbers, alphabet, days of the week, colors, shapes
- Ø Extremely restless and easily distracted
- Ø Trouble interacting with peers
- Ø Difficulty following directions or routines
- Ø Fine motor skills slow to develop

Grades K-4

- Ø Slow to learn the connection between letters and sounds
- Ø Confuses basic words (run, eat, want)
- Ø Makes consistent reading and spelling errors including letter reversals (b/d), inversions (m/w), transpositions (felt, left), and substitutions (house/home)
- Ø Transposes number sequences and confuses arithmetic signs (+, -, x, /, =)
- Ø Slow to remember facts
- Ø Impulsive, difficulty planning
- Ø Unstable pencil grip
- Ø Trouble learning about time
- Ø Poor coordination, unaware of physical surroundings, prone to accidents

Grades 5-8

- Ø Reverses letter sequences (soiled/solid, left/felt)
- Ø Slow to learn prefixes, suffixes, root words, and other spelling strategies
- Ø Avoids reading aloud
- Ø Difficulty with handwriting
- Ø Awkward, fist-like, or tight pencil grip
- Ø Avoids writing compositions
- Ø Slow or poor recall of facts
- Ø Difficulty making friends
- Ø Trouble understanding body language and facial expressions

High School Students and Adults

- Ø Continues to spell incorrectly, frequently spells the same word differently in a single piece of writing
- Ø Avoids reading and writing tasks
- Ø Trouble summarizing
- Ø Trouble with open-ended questions on tests
- Ø Weak memory skills
- Ø Difficulty adjusting to new settings
- Ø Works slowly
- Ø Poor grasp of abstract concepts
- Ø Either pay too little attention to details or focuses on them too much
- Ø Misreads information