

# Learning Disability

This information has been adapted with approval of  
Ldonline.org

For more information, please see their website

- What is a learning disability?
- Common signs of learning disabilities
- How to respond
- Get help early
- Parent tips
- For more information

## What is a learning disability?

A learning disability is a neurological disorder. In simple terms, a learning disability results from a difference in the way a person's brain is "wired". Children with learning disabilities are as smart as or smarter than their peers. But they may have difficulty reading, writing, spelling, reasoning, recalling, and/or organizing information if left to figure things out by themselves or if taught in conventional ways.

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 strategies for dealing with specific difficulties.

**Not all great minds think alike**

Did you know that Albert Einstein couldn't read until he was nine? Walt Disney, General George Patton, and Vice President Nelson Rockefeller had trouble reading all their lives. Whoopi Goldberg and Charles Schwab and many others have learning disabilities, which haven't affected their ultimate success.

## 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) and learning disabilities often occur at the same time, but the two disorders are not the same.

## Common learning disabilities

- Dyslexia – a language-based disability in which a person has trouble understanding written words. It may also be referred to as reading disability or reading disorder.

- 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 Disorders – sensory disabilities in which a person has difficulty understanding language despite normal hearing and vision.
- Nonverbal Learning Disabilities – a neurological disorder which originates in the right hemisphere of the brain, causing problems with visual-spatial, intuitive, organizational, evaluative and holistic processing functions.

## 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 percent 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**

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

## **Grades K-4**

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

## **Grades 5-8**

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

## **High School Students and Adults**

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

## **How to Respond**

### **Know your child's strengths**

Children with learning disabilities are often highly intelligent, possess leadership skills, or are superior in music, arts, sports, or other creative areas. Rather than focusing solely on your child's deficiencies, emphasize and reward your child's strengths. Encourage your child in areas of interest outside the classroom.

## **Collect information about your child's performance**

Meet with your child's teachers, tutors, and school support personnel to understand performance levels, and attitude toward school. Observe your child's ability to study, complete homework, and finish tasks that you assign at home.

See the tips below on how to organize information about your child's learning disability.

## **Have your child evaluated**

Ask school authorities to provide a comprehensive educational evaluation including assessment tests. Tests for learning disabilities are referred to as assessment tests because they evaluate and measure areas of strengths and weaknesses. A comprehensive evaluation, however, includes a variety of procedures in addition to the assessment tests, such as interviews, direct observation, reviews of your child's educational and medical history, and conferences with professionals who work with your child. Either you or the school can request this evaluation, but it is given only with your written permission.

Since you are one of the best observers of your child's development, it is important that you be an active participant in the evaluation process. If you don't understand the test results, ask questions!

## **Work as a team to help your child**

If the evaluation shows that your child has a learning disability, your child is eligible for special education services. If eligible, you will work with a team of professionals, including your child's teacher, to develop an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

The IEP is a written document summarizing your child's current educational performance; annual goals and short-

term objectives; nature and projected duration of your child's special services; and methods for evaluating progress. For students 16 years and older, an IEP must include a transition plan to move the student from school to the "real world."

If your child does not qualify for special education, it is still important for you to work with your child's teacher to develop an informal program that meets your child's learning needs. You are a vital part of your child's education!

### **Talk to your child about learning disabilities**

Children with learning disabilities must be assured that they are not dumb or lazy. They are intelligent people who have trouble learning because their minds process words or information differently. It is not easy to talk with your child about a disability that you do not fully understand. Be informed. It is important to be honest and optimistic-explain to your child that they struggle with learning, but that they can learn. Focus on your child's talents and strengths. Tell them you are confident that with effort and the right help they will be able to meet the challenge and succeed!

### **Find accommodations that can help**

Teachers can change classroom routines to help children with learning disabilities. Meet with your child's teacher about these possibilities: reading written information aloud, allowing extra time on exams, taping lessons, and using technology. Have your decisions written into the IEP.

### **Monitor your child's progress**

Watch your child's progress to be sure that your child's needs are being met. Keep your child's education folder up to date, adding new samples of schoolwork and test results. If your child is not making progress, discuss your observations with school personnel and work together to

make changes. Keep a copy of your child's IEP and review it before each IEP meeting.

## **Know your legal rights**

Learn about your special education rights and responsibilities by requesting a summary of legal rights in your native language from your child's school. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) says that your child has the right to a "free and appropriate public education."

IDEA is a law that requires all states and territories to provide a public school education to children with disabilities between ages three and 21, no matter how severe their disabilities are. As soon as children with learning disabilities are identified, they are entitled to services under this law. If your child is identified as having a learning disability, it is your right under IDEA to have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). Basically, this is a written document that summarizes your child's educational performance, plans short-term educational goals and outlines annual goals. It also identifies criteria for measuring progress. You are a big part of this program so don't be afraid to speak up.

## **Tips on how to organize information about your child's learning disability**

- Start a folder of all letters and materials related to your child's education.
- Add copies of school files and names and dates of all tests and results, including medical exams and information from other professionals.
- Collect samples of schoolwork that demonstrate your child's difficulties, as well as strengths.
- Keep a contact log of discussions with professionals.
- Keep a log of your own observations.

This information will help you monitor your child's progress. Review it with other professionals as your child grows.

## **Get Help Early**

It is scary to admit that your child is struggling to learn. Research tells us that parents fear that their child may be “labeled for life” if he or she is identified as having a learning disability. Please know that you are not alone. Consider that at least 2.7 million children are receiving help in school because of a learning disability. The National Institutes of Health even estimate that one of every seven Americans (15 percent) has some degree of learning disability.

It is very important that you seek help as soon as you realize your child is having difficulty learning. Seeking help – and certainly recognizing the early signs of a learning disability – can mean the difference between success and failure for your child in school.

Most learning disabilities affect reading and language skills. In fact, a significant majority of students with a learning disability have problems with reading. If these children receive appropriate help in the early grades, most of them will become skilled, independent readers. When help is delayed, it becomes harder and harder for children to catch up.

Perhaps the most important reason to seek help early is to spare children the frustration and failure they experience when they don't do well in school and don't know why. You must help your child understand that he or she simply learns differently.

### **Why get help immediately?**

- 80% of students with a learning disability have trouble reading.
- 90% percent will read normally if they receive help by the first grade.

- 75% percent of children who receive help after the age of nine will have some difficulty throughout life.

## **What should I do first?**

- Trust your intuition! No one knows your child better than you, so if you suspect a real problem, speak to teachers and other school personnel, seek information and expert opinions, and do not be afraid to have him or her evaluated right away.
- Meet with your child's teacher and guidance counselor. They can tell you how well your child interacts with his or her peers, as well as help to arrange a full evaluation of how well your child is performing in school.
- Know your legal rights and responsibilities. Learn about the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). If you prefer to have information shared in a language other than English, be sure to ask for a summary of your rights and evaluations in your native language.
- Observe your child's strengths and interests. Encourage him or her at school and at play, and reward your child for the many things he or she does well.
- Realize that you are not alone and that experienced people and groups have information and help for you right now.
- Learn as much as you can. The more you know about learning disabilities, the more you can help your child. Start with your school. Then contact one of the organizations on the [resources page](#).

## **Parent Tips**

### **Work with your child at home**

Parents are a child's first and best teachers. Show your child that reading can be fun. Read to your child every day. Visit the library frequently. Point out words on billboards and traffic signs as you drive, on food labels at the grocery store, on packages, mail, and letters. Play word games. Set an

example by giving your child a chance to see you reading and writing at home.

See the tips below on how to help your child with schoolwork.

### **Join with others who care**

You are not alone. By joining with other parents and professionals you can increase awareness of the issue, dispel popular misconceptions, help establish educational systems that provide for the needs of children with learning disabilities, and get support for yourself. Look into the organizations in [LD Resources](#) for ways to become involved and learn more about learning disabilities.

### **Work with professionals**

There are many trained professionals who can help your child. Ask your child's teacher or a resource consultant for names of individuals who can help. Contact one of the organizations in [LD Resources](#) for additional suggestions and information.

### **Professionals who can help**

- Audiologist – measures hearing ability and provides services for auditory training; offers advice on hearing aids.
- Educational Consultant – gives educational evaluations; familiar with school curriculum but may have a background in special education issues.
- Educational Therapist – develops and runs programs for learning and behavior problems.
- Learning Disabilities Specialist – a teacher with specific training and credentials to provide educational services to students with learning disabilities and their teachers.
- Neurologist – looks for possible damage to brain functions (medical doctor).

- Occupational Therapist – helps improve motor and sensory functions to increase the ability to perform daily tasks.
- Pediatrician – provides medical services to infants, children, and adolescents; trained in overall growth and development including motor, sensory, and behavioral development (medical doctor).
- Psychiatrist – diagnoses and treats severe behavioral and emotional problems and may prescribe medications (medical doctor).
- Psychologist (Clinical) – provides psychological and intellectual assessment and treatment for mental and emotional health.
- School/Educational Psychologist – gives and interprets psychological and educational tests; assists with behavior management; provides counseling; consults with parents, staff, and community agencies about educational issues.
- Speech and Language Therapist – helps children with language and speech difficulties.

## **Tips for helping with schoolwork**

- Show an interest in your child's homework. Inquire about the subjects and the work to be done. Ask questions that require answers longer than one or two words.
- Help your child organize homework materials before beginning.
- Establish a regular time with your child to do homework-developing a schedule helps avoid procrastination.
- Find a specific place for your child to do homework that has lots of light, quiet, and plenty of work space.
- Encourage your child to ask questions and search for answers, taking the time to figure out correct answers.
- Make sure your child backs up answers with facts and evidence.

- Practice school-taught skills at home.
- Relate homework to your child's everyday life. For instance, teach fractions and measurements as you prepare a favorite food together.
- Be a role model-take the opportunity to read a book or newspaper or write a letter while your child studies.
- Praise your child for both the small steps and big leaps in the right direction.

## **Help your child become a better reader (for early readers)**

- Work on the relationship between letters and words. Teach younger children how to spell a few special words, such as their own names, the names of pets or favorite cartoon characters, or words they see frequently like *stop* or *exit*.
- Help your child understand that language is made up of sounds, syllables, and words. Sing songs and read rhyming books. Play word games; for instance, think of words that rhyme with *dog* or begin with *p*.
- Teach letter sounds. Sound out letters and words. Make up your own silly words with your child.
- Sound out new words and encourage your child to spell by speaking each sound aloud.
- Notice spelling patterns. Point out similarities between words, such as *fall*, *ball*, and *hall* or *cat*, *fat*, and *hat*.

## **For more information**

A great deal of advice and information is available on learning disabilities. Remember, there are no quick fixes, so be cautious of anyone offering "cures." The following informational resources are recommended by all six of the leading national learning disability organizations.

### **Books**

- [All Kinds of Minds](#)

- [Learning to Learn](#)
- [No One to Play With](#)
- [Smart Kids with School Problems](#)
- [When Your Child has LD: A Survival Guide for Parents](#)

## **Videos**

- [How Difficult Can This Be? The F.A.T. City Workshop](#)
- [Last One Picked, First One Picked On](#)

## **National organizations**

- [LD OnLine](#)
- [Learning Disabilities Association of America](#)
- [National Center for Learning Disabilities](#)
- [International Dyslexia Association](#)
- [Schwab Learning](#)
- [Council for Exceptional Children, Division for Learning Disabilities](#)
- [Council for Learning Disabilities](#)
- [Reading Rockets](#)

## **State resources**

- [The National Dissemination Center for Children With Disabilities](#) NICHCY offers up-to-date lists of resources available in each state.

## **Books on tape**

- [Recording for the Blind & Dyslexic](#) RFB&D provides books on audiotape, covering all subjects from kindergarten through postgraduate. Services are available to all students with a verified learning disability.

