

identifying disabilities

Dyslexia/Dysgraphia/Dyscalculia

Discovering the Truth About Learning Disabilities

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Editor's Note:

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No wonder there has been so much information generated about learning disabilities (LD) over the last decade or so. According to the National Institutes of Health, about 15 percent or 1 in 7 Americans have some type LD. But most people still don't understand much about learning disability. One of the reasons LD has been so misunderstood is because it's an "invisible" disability. It is easier to recognize and understand the challenges faced by a child who has a disability with obvious physical characteristics such as Down syndrome, cerebral palsy or blindness.

A Hidden Disability

Most children who have LD look just like their peers. According to Dr. Sydney Rice, medical director at Kluge Children's Rehabilitation Center, "Hidden disabilities, such as learning disability, are often mysterious to children, family members and friends." Most people don't know that a youngster with LD may face significant challenges and difficulties

in and out of the classroom on a daily basis. Dr. Rice continues, "Although these disabilities can cause tremendous stress and anxiety because of unfulfilled expectations, the disability is not obvious to others, and children may not receive the support they need." Some people still think LD is a mild form of mental retardation or caused by an emotional disorder. Others persist in the belief that individuals who have LD are not as intelligent as most people or they are lazy—or both.

Children who have LD can struggle in academic areas for years if their LD is not identified and addressed. Feelings of frustration and anger can cause problems in other areas such as social and emotional development.

Widespread Misunderstanding

The term learning disability (LD) has become quite common, but widespread misunderstanding about LD persists. A learning disability is a neurobiological disorder in which a person's brain works differently than that of most other people, and this difference can affect the ability to think and remember. LD is not primarily the result of visual, hearing or motor impairments, mental retardation, emotional disturbance, economic, environmental or cultural disadvantage. Several of the most common types of LD are dyslexia, dysgraphia and dyscalculia. They can occur individually or in varying degrees, in combinations.

Dyslexia

Dyslexia is the most common type of LD. When people hear the term dyslexia they often think that the problem it causes in reading is simply reversal of letters in words. For example, "saw" would be seen and read as "was," or "war" would be seen and

read as "raw." These types of reversals can be a challenge for readers who have dyslexia, but there are many other problems; difficulty in receptive language processing (understanding words and sentences) and in expressive language (speaking and writing). Children with dyslexia may have trouble interpreting what they see or hear and/or linking information from different parts of the brain. When this results in the inability to effectively listen, read, spell, write, or even speak, LD can have a major impact on many areas of learning.

Dysgraphia

Sometimes a child may have just one type of LD, but often a combination of different kinds of LD occur together in the same individual. Dysgraphia frequently occurs with dyslexia and adversely affects the area of writing. Dysgraphia may impact school-age children in their ability to correctly and legibly form letters in a defined space within words and sentences. Younger children, who have not yet learned to print or write, may have difficulty with pre-writing activities such as drawing simple shapes. For these children, working with an occupational therapist on activities and strategies to develop more legible writing and more accurate prewriting skills can be very helpful. Dysgraphia, however, can also affect composition, grammar and spelling—the 'thinking' part of writing. The same children who, when asked about a particular topic or question, give very detailed, thoughtful information verbally, may only be able to relay a small percentage of the same information when asked to answer in written form.

Dyscalculia

While many students have some difficulty with arithmetic, children with another common form of LD called dyscalculia have exceptional difficulty with understanding and

remembering the most basic mathematical concepts. They can be significantly challenged when attempting simple mathematical calculations such as multiplication, division, subtraction or even addition. There may be problems in remembering basic math facts, correctly sequencing numbers, and solving the simplest of word problems. Related areas such as time and direction can also present difficulties for children with dyscalculia.

Children who have LD can struggle in academic areas for years if their LD is not identified and addressed. Feelings of frustration and anger can cause problems in other areas such as social and emotional development. Parents, guardians and professionals who want to know more about LD can find an incredible amount of information on the Internet, in books and magazines and even in the news.

Guidance & Support for Parents

Having a learning disability is generally a lifelong challenge, but there are many tools and strategies to minimize the affects of LD on a child's ability and motivation to learn. Inge Horowitz is the Executive Director of the Learning Disabilities Council (LDC) and co-author, with Mary Louise Trusdell, of the Council's 3rd edition of *Understanding Learning Disabilities: A Parent Guide And Workbook*. She says, "This book has truly guided and supported the parents of children with learning disabilities since it was first written in 1989 by a group of committed parents and professionals in Richmond, Virginia." The 3rd edition of this book can be previewed and ordered on the council's Web site at www.ldcouncil.com. Identifying and understanding LD can take some time and persistence, but early identification is key and there are evaluations and assessments available to identify even young children having — or at risk of developing — LD.

CCLD

The Coordinated Campaign for Learning Disabilities is a collaborative effort of a number of agencies working to provide extensive information and resources for families, educators and others who want to know more about LD. The CCLD Web site at www.ldonline.org provides a wealth of info including early warning signs, normal and atypical development, assessments and methods to identify LD, strategies for parents and teachers to assist a child or student with LD, many excellent references and resources, and more. For more information about LD, visit their Web site or contact CCLD at 1-888-GR8-MIND or 1-888-478-6463.

For additional information

Refer to the section of LD resources in the Specific Disability section of resources on p. 76 ■

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