

identifying disabilities

Learning About Learning Disabilities

By Cheryl Ann Hughes

Editor's Note:

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Learning disabilities (LD) is a term which is popping up more and more these days. In fact, the number of children diagnosed with LD has tripled in the last 25 years. But what exactly is a LD? And how do you know if your child is affected by one? Every parent should know the answers to these questions.

A lifelong disorder, LD affects the way individuals interpret what they see and hear, and sometimes how information is linked from different parts of the brain. It's often identified by a significant gap between a person's intelligence and the skills that person has achieved at each age. Difficulties with basic reading and language skills are the most common learning disabilities. These disabilities have different forms and affect different areas of schoolwork.

For instance, dyslexia is a language-based disability in which a person has trouble understanding words, sentences or paragraphs; dyscalculia is a mathematical disability in which a person has a difficult time solving arithmetic problems and grasping mathematical concepts; dysgraphia is a writing disability in which a person finds it hard to form letters or write within a defined space; auditory and visual processing disabilities are disabilities in which a person has difficulty understanding language despite normal hearing and vision. Sometimes several disabilities may overlap, making schoolwork extremely difficult.

Jen,* on the other hand, was nine when it was determined that she has a visual processing problem. Until then, Jen had been able to compensate for her visual processing deficit and although she struggled in school, neither her mother or her teachers felt she needed to be tested.

Education specialists state that some problems come up earlier than others, and a lot depends on when a parent, teacher or daycare provider notices that there's a problem.

The more a parent knows about normal development, the easier it is to pick out ways in which a child may not be keeping up with his peers: is he/she the only one who doesn't know his address? Do the other children in his/her class know their phone numbers? These are just little signs — and may be indicative of nothing. On the other hand, it's possible that a teacher might pick up that everybody else at the table is doing these things and he's not. This might be a sign that further investigation is necessary.

It's important to remember that most children will experience one or some of the symptoms of a learning disability at one time or another. It is the consistent, recurring symptoms (see checklist of symptoms) which necessitate further investigation on the part of parents.

Now What?

What should you do if you think your child may have a learning disability? Above all, don't panic. Children with learning disabilities are often very intelligent and show great skill in many areas. And while learning disabilities can make certain parts of life more challenging for both the children and their families who experience them, coping strategies can be learned.

Be informed and inform your child. Let him or her know that a learning disability is not a sign of stupidity. Consult with the child's principal and teachers to discuss strengths and weaknesses and what can be done to help. Have a comprehensive educational evaluation performed to determine where the child's strengths and weaknesses lie. If the evaluation shows that there is a learning disability, and the child qualifies, he or she will be eligible for special education services. An Individualized Education Program (IEP) will be developed for the child. This important document summarizes the child's current educational performance and lists goals, the nature and projected duration of the child's special services, and ways in which progress will be measured.

*Names have been changed to protect privacy.



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Will the Child Outgrow It?

Diagnosing learning disabilities is rarely without its difficulties. Part of the reason for this is that the characteristics and severity of learning disabilities vary. There are different types of difficulties, and each can present in a different way with a different child. Annie* was about 2 1/2 years old when her mother noticed that her language development wasn't progressing normally. "She had been progressing nicely," says Elizabeth*, a former special education teacher and mother of three. "But then all of sudden, her development went flat." Because Annie was Elizabeth's third child and because of Elizabeth's background in special education, she knew this was a bad sign. She therefore scheduled Annie to have a full speech and language evaluation.

Getting Prepared

It's important for parents to organize all the information they collect about their child or children who may need special education assistance. Keep a folder of all materials related to your child's education; add copies of school files, names and dates of all tests and results, a contact log of discussions with professionals, a log of your own observations, and samples of schoolwork which reflects both your child's strengths and weaknesses.

Parents need to be well informed about the process of getting help for their child. In this area, it may be helpful for parents to contact a member of the local Parent Resource Center, if one is available (see Special Education directory on p. 48). Staff members can often answer questions or may be able to direct the parent to reading material that will help clarify the information.

Getting Help

Once a parent or teacher thinks that a child may have special learning needs, that person may make a referral — preferably in writing — to the principal or other school staff member designated to handle special education issues in the child's school. Children do not have to be in public school to be referred. Parents of a student in a private school can call their local elementary school and make a referral to the principal or designated staff member in the same way. Referrals are made through the county Child Find program for children of preschool age. (See contact information by county on p. 48) Child Find will perform a screening to determine if they should refer the child for

additional testing. If a child is under two years old, referrals can be made to Early Intervention Services. (see p. 6.)

Sharon Sheppard, the special education regional coordinator and preschool program coordinator in Roanoke County schools believes that it's important for parents to know that there are resources available. "Parents should never feel isolated," she states. "There are resources out there and the school is one of them." Sheppard goes on to explain that it can be hard for parents to understand that the school system is mandated to work toward the least restrictive environment for a child, which may not be exactly what the parent feels is best. "We can move toward more modifications and adaptations," she states, "but we need try the least restrictive environment first. The school is there to help the family," Sheppard states. "We are all on the same team, and that is what's best for the child."

In order to be the most effective advocate for your child, it's important to stay informed. Check out the resource list at the back of this book, read information on the Internet, get in touch with the Parent Resource Center of your county's school system. These offer a wealth of reading material and information for parents trying to navigate the special services maze. Develop a good relationship with the school and be able to communicate effectively. The systems and organizations that can spell success for your child are out there. It just takes a little time, a lot of patience, and the determination to do what you have to do. Perhaps this is best summed up by Elizabeth, mother of 16-year-old Annie, "Along the way, there have been bumps in the road, but if you keep communication going and keep focusing on the child, there's a lot to be offered." ■

RED FLAGS SIGNAL CAUTION AHEAD

The following list of common warning signs was taken from the website of the National Center for Learning Disabilities. It's important to note that many children may display one or two of these traits; however, consistent problems with a number of these behaviors could indicate the presence of a learning disability.

PRESCHOOL:

Does the child have trouble with or delayed development in:

- Learning the alphabet
- Rhyming words
- Connecting sounds and letters
- Counting and learning numbers
- Being understood when he or she speaks to a stranger
- Using scissors, crayons, and paints
- Reacting too much or too little to touch
- Using words or, (later), stringing words together into phrases
- Pronouncing words
- Walking forward or up and down stairs
- Remembering the names of colors
- Dressing without assistance

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL:

Does the child have trouble with:

- Learning new vocabulary
- Speaking in full sentences
- Understanding the rules of conversation
- Retelling stories
- Remembering newly learned information
- Playing with peers
- Moving from one activity to another
- Expressing thoughts orally or in writing
- Holding a pencil
- Handwriting
- Computing math problems at his or her grade level
- Following directions
- Self-esteem
- Remembering routines
- Learning new skills
- Understanding what he or she reads
- Succeeding in one or more subject areas
- Drawing or copying shapes
- Understanding what information presented in class is important
- Modulating voice (may speak too loudly or in a monotone)
- Keeping notebook neat and assignments organized
- Remembering and sticking to deadlines
- Understanding how to play age-appropriate board games