

Learning Disabilities in Children

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LEARNING DISABILITY SYMPTOMS, TYPES, AND TESTING



If you think your child might have a learning disability, you may feel overwhelmed by the information, the numerous tests, and the lack of clarity about how to get the best help for your child. What you need is a roadmap for sifting through the information and finding the valuable support that is available. You also may need a bit of perspective. The brain has an amazing capacity to change and children respond when given the support and encouragement they need. Early intervention and support can really make a difference in giving your child the best chance for success.

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What is a learning disability?

"He has the ability, if he just tried harder, he could do it. He chooses not to do the work."
 "If she would just pay attention, she would get it."
 "After I give the instructions, he sits there and stares at his paper. He is not motivated."

A child with a learning disability cannot try harder, pay closer attention, or improve motivation on their own; they need help to learn how to do those things. A learning disability, or learning disorder, is not a problem with intelligence. Learning disorders are caused by a difference in the brain that affects how information is received, processed, or communicated. Children and adults with learning disabilities have trouble processing sensory information because they see, hear, and understand things differently.

Hope for learning disabilities: The brain can change

Science has made great strides in understanding the inner workings of the brain, and one important discovery that brings new hope for learning disabilities and disorders is called *neuroplasticity*. Neuroplasticity refers to the brain's natural, lifelong ability to change to form new connections and generate new brain cells in response to experience and learning. This knowledge has led to groundbreaking new treatments for learning disabilities that harness the power of neuroplasticity to retrain the brain.

How does understanding the brain help with a learning disability or disorder?

Using a telephone analogy, faulty wiring in the brain disrupts normal lines of communication and makes it difficult to process information easily. If service was down in a certain area of the city the phone company might fix the problem by re-wiring the connections. Similarly, under the right learning conditions, the brain has the ability to reorganize itself by forming new neural connections. Those new connections facilitate skills like reading and writing that had been difficult using the old connections.

Parenting a child with a learning disability or learning disorder

As a parent, discovering that something may stand in the way of your child's success can be unsettling and difficult. Whether or not your child has a learning disability, remember that the way you behave and what you do has the most impact on your child's chances of success. Everyone faces obstacles and the most important

thing you can show your child, apart from your consistent love and support, is *how* to deal with obstacles. A good attitude won't solve the problem, but it can give your child hope and confidence that things can improve.

Your first task as the parent of a child with a learning disability is to recognize that there are many things you can do to help your child:

- **Keep things in perspective** – Try not to be intimidated by the news that your child may have a learning disability – all people learn differently. Your most important job is to support your child and to help them keep their self esteem intact. Challenges can be overcome. Don't let the tests, school bureaucracy and endless paperwork distract you from what is really important – providing your child with emotional, educational and moral support.
- **Do your own research and become your own expert** – Learn about new developments in learning disabilities, different programs and educational techniques that could make an impact with your child. You may instinctively look to others for solutions – schools, teachers, therapists or doctors – but you need to take charge when it comes to finding the tools your child needs to continue learning.
- **Be an advocate for your child** – You may have to speak up time and time again to get special help for your child. Embrace your role as a proactive parent and work on your communication skills. It may be frustrating at times, but your calm, reasonable and firm voice may make the difference in achieving what you want for your child.
- **Remember that your influence on your child outweighs all others** – Your child will follow your lead. If you approach the learning challenges with optimism, hard work and a sense of humor, your child is likely to embrace your perspective or at least see the challenges as a detour rather than a roadblock. Also, remember that the school situation doesn't have to be perfect. Focus your energy on learning what works and implementing it in your child's life the best you can.

In this age of endless budget cuts and inadequately funded schools, your role in your child's education is more important than ever. Don't sit back and let someone else be responsible for providing your child with the tools they need to learn. You can and should take an active role in your child's education.

Symptoms and types of learning disabilities and disorders

If you're aware of some of the common signs of learning disabilities and learning disorders in children, you'll be able to catch the problem early and take steps to get your child help. Paying attention to normal developmental milestones for toddlers and preschoolers is very important. Early detection of developmental differences may be an early signal of a learning disability and problems that are spotted early can be easier to correct.

A developmental lag might not be considered a symptom of a learning disability until your child is older, but if you recognize it when your child is young, you can intervene early. You know your child better than anyone else does, so if you think there is a problem, it doesn't hurt to get an evaluation. You can also ask your pediatrician for a developmental milestones chart.

The activity of diagnosing the type of learning disability can be overwhelming and time consuming. Try not to get caught up in trying to determine the label or type of disorder and focus instead on figuring out how best to support your child.

The National Center for Learning Disabilities has created a comprehensive checklist covering the eight areas affected by learning disabilities. **Before you read this section, please PRINT the [NCLD checklist for reference](#).** The checklist, organized by skill set and age group, can help you evaluate your child's signs and symptoms and indicate whether you should seek further assistance from a teacher or professional skilled in diagnosing learning disabilities.

Types of learning disabilities are often grouped by school-area skill set or cognitive weakness. If your child is in school, it will probably be apparent if he or she is struggling with reading, writing, or math, and narrowing down the type will be easier.

Motor difficulties and learning disabilities

Motor difficulty refers to problems with movement and coordination whether it is with fine motor skills (cutting, writing) or gross motor skills (running, jumping). A motor disability is sometimes referred to as an "output" activity meaning that it relates to the output of information from the brain. In order to run, jump, write or cut something, the brain must be able to communicate with the necessary limbs to complete the action.

Signs that your child might have a motor coordination disability include problems with physical abilities that require hand-eye coordination, like holding a pencil or buttoning a shirt.

Math difficulties and learning disabilities

Learning disabilities in math vary greatly depending on the child's other strengths and weaknesses. A child's ability to do math will be affected differently by a language learning disability, or a visual disorder or a difficulty with sequencing, memory or organization.

A child with a math-based learning disorder may struggle with memorization and organization of numbers, operation signs, and number "facts" (like $5+5=10$ or $5\times 5=25$). Children with math learning disorders might also have trouble with counting principles (such as counting by 2s or counting by 5s) or have difficulty telling time.

Language difficulties and learning disabilities

Language and communication learning disabilities involve the ability to understand or produce spoken language. Language is also considered an output activity because it requires organizing thoughts in the brain and calling upon the right words to verbally explain something or communicate with someone else.

Signs of a language-based learning disorder involve problems with verbal language skills, such as the ability to retell a story and the fluency of speech, as well as the ability to understand the meaning of words, parts of speech, directions, etc.

Reading difficulties and learning disabilities

There are two types of learning disabilities in reading. Basic reading problems occur when there is difficulty understanding the relationship between sounds, letters and words. Reading comprehension problems occur when there is an inability to grasp the meaning of words, phrases, and paragraphs.

Signs of reading difficulty include problems with:

- letter and word recognition
- reading speed and fluency
- understanding words and ideas
- general vocabulary skills

Writing difficulties and learning disabilities

Learning disabilities in writing can involve the physical act of writing or the mental activity of comprehending and synthesizing information. Basic writing disorder refers to physical difficulty forming words and letters. Expressive writing disability indicates a struggle to organize thoughts on paper.

Symptoms of a written language learning disability revolve around the act of writing and include. They include problems with:

- neatness and consistency of writing
- spelling consistency
- accurately copying letters and words
- writing organization and coherence

Auditory and visual processing: the importance of the ears and the eyes

The eyes and the ears are the primary means of delivering information to the brain, a process sometimes called "input." If either the eyes or the ears aren't working properly, learning can suffer and there is a greater likelihood of a learning disability or disorder.

Professionals may refer to the ability to hear well as "auditory processing skills" or "receptive language." The ability to hear things correctly greatly impacts the ability to read, write and spell. An inability to distinguish subtle differences in sound, or hearing sounds at the wrong speed make it difficult to sound out words and understand the basic concepts of reading and writing.

Problems in visual perception include missing subtle differences in shapes, reversing letters or numbers, skipping words, skipping lines, misperceiving depth or distance, or having problems with eye-hand coordination. Professionals may refer to the work of the eyes as "visual processing." Visual perception can affect gross and fine motor skills, reading comprehension, and math.

Common Types of Learning Disabilities		
Dyslexia	Difficulty processing language	Problems reading, writing, spelling,

Common Types of Learning Disabilities

		speaking
Dyscalculia	Difficulty with math	Problems doing math problems, understanding time, using money
Dysgraphia	Difficulty with writing	Problems with handwriting, spelling, organizing ideas
Dyspraxia (Sensory Integration Disorder)	Difficulty with fine motor skills	Problems with hand-eye coordination, balance, manual dexterity
Auditory Processing Disorder	Difficulty hearing differences between sounds	Problems with reading, comprehension, language
Visual Processing Disorder	Difficulty interpreting visual information	Problems with reading, math, maps, charts, symbols, pictures

Learning disabilities: Related problems and issues

Social and emotional difficulties

Sometimes kids have trouble expressing their feelings, calming themselves down, and reading nonverbal cues, which can lead to difficulty in the classroom and with their peers.

Social and emotional skills are an area where you can have a huge impact as a parent. For all children, but especially those with learning disabilities, social and emotional skills are the most consistent indicators of success, outweighing everything else, including academic factors. Academic challenges may lead to low self-esteem, withdrawal and behavior problems, but you can counter these things by creating a strong support system for your child and helping them learn to express themselves, deal with frustration and work through challenges. Your focus on their growth as a person, and not just on academic achievements will help them learn good emotional habits and the right tools for lifelong success.

Other disorders that make learning difficult

Difficulty in school doesn't always stem from a learning disability. Anxiety, depression, stressful events, emotional trauma, and other conditions affecting concentration make learning more of a challenge.

- **ADHD** – Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), while not considered a learning disability, can certainly disrupt learning. Children with ADHD often have problems with sitting still, staying focused, following instructions, staying organized, and completing homework.
- **Autism** – Difficulty mastering certain academic skills can stem from Pervasive Developmental Disorders such as autism and Asperger's syndrome. Children with an autism spectrum disorder may have trouble making friends, reading body language, communicating, and making eye contact.



[ADD & ADHD in Children](#)
Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms



[Exploring the Autism Spectrum](#)
A Guide to the Autism Spectrum Disorders and their Symptoms

Can gifted children have learning disabilities?

Many gifted and talented children (and adults) are often misdiagnosed as having learning disabilities or behavior disorders. This occurs because there are many characteristics of gifted children, both social and emotional, that are mistaken as symptoms of specific learning disorders.

It is not uncommon for some gifted children (those with IQ scores over 140) to display a significant discrepancy (20 points or more) between Verbal IQ and Performance IQ and possess characteristics of a learning disability. Often gifted children have unusual learning styles, and even though they are very intelligent, they may also have learning disorders.

Without intervention, self-esteem issues are almost certain in the life of a child who is both gifted and has a

learning disability. Whether or not your gifted child also has a learning disability, they will benefit from extra support, encouragement and love.

Diagnosis and testing for learning disabilities and disorders

The process of diagnosing a learning disability can be confusing. It involves testing, history taking and observation by a trained specialist. Finding a reputable referral is important. Start with your child's school, and if they are unable to help you, ask your insurance company, doctor, friends and family.

Specialists trained to do psychological testing and result interpretation

- Clinical psychologist
- School psychologist
- Educational psychologist
- Developmental psychologist
- Neuropsychologist
- Psychometrist
- Occupational therapist (tests sensory disorders that can lead to learning problems)
- Speech and language therapist

Sometimes several professionals coordinate services as a team to obtain an accurate diagnosis, including input from your child's teachers. Recommendations can then be made for special education services or speech-language therapy within the public school system.

A nonpublic school that specializes in treating learning disabilities might be a good alternative if the public school is not working out. For a list of nonpublic schools in your area go to the website for your state's Department of Education. For example, in California see: [Nonpublic Schools Database](#).

Integration, sequencing and abstraction: Technical terms for how the brain works

A professional learning disorders specialist might refer to the importance of "integration" to learning. Integration refers to the understanding of information that has been delivered to the brain, and it includes three steps: sequencing, which means putting information in the right order; abstraction, which is making sense of the information; and organization, which refers to the brain's ability to use the information to form complete thoughts.

Each of the three steps is important and your child may have a weakness in one area or another that causes learning difficulty. For example, in math, sequencing (the ability to put things in order) is important for learning to count or do multiplication (as well as learn the alphabet or the months of the year). Similarly, abstraction and organization are important parts of numerous educational skills and abilities. If a certain brain activity isn't happening correctly, it will create a roadblock to learning.

Getting help for children with learning disabilities

All children can be both exhilarating and exhausting, but it may seem that your child with a learning disability is especially so. You may experience some frustration trying to work with your child, and it can seem like an uphill battle when you don't have the information you need. After you learn what their specific learning disability is and how it is affecting their behavior, you will be able to start addressing the challenges in school and at home. If you can, be sure to reach out to other parents who are addressing similar challenges as they can be great sources of knowledge and emotional support.

Related articles



[Parenting Children with Learning Disabilities](#)
Tips for Helping Your Child



[Attachment Disorders](#)
Insecure Attachment and Reactive Attachment Disorders

More Helpguide Articles:

- [ADD / ADHD in Children](#): Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms
- [Autism Signs, Symptoms, and Causes](#): Early Signs of Autism in Children
- [Separation Anxiety and Separation Anxiety Disorder](#): How to Ease Your Child's Separation Anxiety

Related links for learning disabilities and learning disorders

Comprehensive sites on learning disabilities and disorders

[American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry](#) – Facts for Families provides concise and up-to-date information on issues that affect children, teenagers, and their families. Access is available to 93 different subjects. Document #16 is an overview of Learning Disability facts. (aacap.org)

[National Center for Learning Disabilities](#) – Discusses what a learning disability is, how parents and school personnel can work together, and the social and emotional challenges of learning disorders. (ncl.org)

[NCLD Learning Disabilities Checklist](#) – Comprehensive checklist covers the eight skill areas often affected by learning disabilities. The checklist is organized by skill set and age group. (ncl.org)

[LD Basics](#) – A wealth of information describing the full spectrum of learning disabilities and how to spot them, plus advice for parents on responding and getting help. (ldonline.org)

[Warning Signs of Learning Disabilities](#) – Gives an extensive list of learning disability categories. (ldam.org)

[Learning Disabilities](#) – Kid-friendly and encouraging article about learning disabilities, including signs, causes and help. (Teens Health)

Specific learning disabilities and disorders

[Recognizing Dyslexia](#) – Signs and symptoms of learning disabilities to be aware of. (Dyslexia-Teacher.com)

[Dyscalculia: Learning Disabilities in Mathematics](#) – Discusses symptoms, diagnosis, effects, and treatment for the learning disability dyscalculia. (National Center for Learning Disabilities)

[Dysgraphia](#) – Provides a description of the writing problems that are characteristic of the learning disability dysgraphia, with a wealth of solutions. (West Virginia University)

[Nonverbal Learning Disorders](#) – Excellent overview of this often-neglected learning disability, which often goes unidentified until adolescence. (LD Online)

Other problems that affect learning

[Auditory Processing Disorder in Children](#) – Clear, detailed description of this learning disability where the child's ears work properly, but the brain has trouble interpreting what the ears hear. (National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders)

[Learning program based on brain research](#) – Development of Fast ForWord, a program to help kids with auditory processing disorder learn to read. (Scientific Learning)

[Understanding Sensory Integration](#) – Provides an overview of the learning disability sensory integration dysfunction, which heightens and confuses the sensory information a child takes in. (LD OnLine)

[Early acquisition of ASL, an innovative approach to treating ADHD](#) (PDF) – authored by Deborah A. Cutter, Psy.D., MFT, Clinical Director of Creative Behavioral Consultants and Susan M. Zneimer, Ph.D., FACMG, Adjunct Professor at the University of Southern California Keck School of Medicine

[Learning Disabilities Basics](#) – Selection of articles on different aspects of learning disabilities including signs and symptoms and brain research. (Great Schools)

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