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Learning Disabilities

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Abstract

Imagine having important needs and ideas to communicate, but being unable to express them. Perhaps feeling bombarded by sights and sounds, unable to focus your attention. Or trying to read or add but not being able to make sense of the letters or numbers.

You may not need to imagine. You may be the parent or teacher or child experiences academic problems, or have someone in your family diagnosed as learning disabled. Or possibly as a child you were told you had a reading problem called Dyslexia or some other learning handicap.

Although different from person to person, these difficulties make up daily experiences of many learning disabled children, adolescents, and adults. A person with a learning disabilities may experience a cycle of academic failure and lowered self-esteem. Having these handicaps – or living with someone who has them – can bring overwhelming frustration.

But the prospects are hopeful. It is important to remember that a person with a learning disability can learn. The disability usually only affects certain limited areas of a child's development. In fact, rarely are learning disabilities severe enough to impair a person's potential to live a happy, normal life.

Introduction

What Are Learning Disabilities?

Learning disabilities (LDs) are real. They affect the brain's ability to receive, process, store, respond to and communicate information. LDs are actually a group of disorders, not a single disorder.

Learning disabilities are *not* the same as intellectual disabilities (formerly known as mental retardation), sensory impairments (vision or hearing) or autism spectrum disorders. People with LD are of average or above-average intelligence but still struggle to acquire skills that impact their performance in school, at home, in the community and in the workplace. Learning disabilities are lifelong, and the sooner they are recognized and identified, the sooner steps can be taken to circumvent or overcome the challenges they present.

How Can You Tell If Someone Has a Learning Disability?

The hallmark sign of a learning disability is a distinct and unexplained gap between a person's level of expected achievement and their performance. Learning disabilities affect every person differently and they present differently at various stages of development. LDs can range from mild to severe and it is not uncommon for people to have more than one learning disability. In addition, about one-third of individuals with LD also have Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). While LD and ADHD can share common features, such as difficulties with concentration, memory, and organizational skills, they are not the same types of disorder. Unfortunately, LD is often confused with ADHD and is frequently mistaken as laziness or associated with disorders of emotion and behavior. A careful and thorough review of concerns, with input from multiple sources (including parents, educators, physicians, psychologists, speech-language providers and, of course, the person themselves) is the only way to rule in or rule out a learning disability.

Learning disabilities can affect a person's ability in the areas of

- Listening
- Speaking
- Reading

- Writing
- Spelling
- Reasoning
- Mathematics

See the chart below for specific types of learning disabilities and related disorders.

LD Terminology			
Disability	Area of difficulty	Symptoms include trouble with	Example
<u>Dyslexia</u>	Processing language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading • Writing • Spelling 	Confusing letter names and sounds, difficulties blending sounds into words, slow rate of reading, trouble remembering after reading text
<u>Dyscalculia</u>	Math skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Computation • Remembering math facts • Concepts of time and money 	Difficulty learning to count by 2s, 3s, 4s, poor mental math skills, problems with spatial directions
<u>Dysgraphia</u>	Written expression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handwriting • Spelling 	Illegible handwriting,

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Composition 	difficulty organizing ideas for writing
<u>Dyspraxia</u>	Fine motor skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordination • Manual dexterity 	Trouble with scissors, buttons, drawing
Information Processing Disorders			
<u>Auditory Processing Disorder</u>	Interpreting auditory information	Language development Reading	Difficulty anticipating how a speaker will end a sentence
<u>Visual Processing Disorder</u>	Interpreting visual information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading • Writing • Math 	Difficulty distinguishing letters like "h" and "n"
Other Related Disorders			
<u>Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)</u>	Concentration and focus	Over-activity Distractibility Impulsivity	Can't sit still, loses interest quickly, daydreams

What Causes Learning Disabilities?

Experts aren't exactly sure what causes learning disabilities. In fact, there is often no apparent cause for LD. LD may be due to

- **Heredity.** Often learning disabilities run in families. Children with LD are likely to have parents or other relatives with similar difficulties.
- **Problems during pregnancy and birth.** An illness or injury during or before birth may cause an LD. Drug and alcohol use during pregnancy, low birth weight, lack of oxygen and premature or prolonged labor may also lead to an LD.
- **Incidents after birth.** Serious illness, head injuries, poor nutrition and exposure to toxins such as lead can contribute to LD.

Learning disabilities are not caused by economic disadvantage or cultural differences, nor are they the result of lack of educational opportunity. That said, children who are denied timely and effective instruction during critical times during their development are at high risk for showing signs of LD during the school years and beyond.

What Can You Do About Learning Disabilities?

Learning disabilities are lifelong challenges. Although they don't go away, they should not stop individuals from achieving their goals. A learning disability is not a disease, and there is no single course of treatment or intervention that works for everyone. The first step to overcoming the challenges posed by LD is to recognize that a problem might exist. Then seek help from qualified professionals, who can provide guidance through a personalized evaluation process. Working with a trusted team of professionals, it is then possible to identify the types of accommodations, services and supports that will lead to success.

Identification

The LD identification process is not set in stone and will vary from state to state (for school age children) and from one adult to another depending upon the nature of the presenting difficulties and the professionals enlisted to provide testing and guidance. For example, an elementary school age child who shows signs of dyslexia (specific LD in reading) might demonstrate excellent skills in math, so an evaluation

would be tailored to better understand the specific components of reading (i.e., phonemic awareness, comprehension) that would help with planning an appropriate course of instruction and intervention.

If a parent suspects that their child might have a learning disability, it is important that they record (in writing) their observations and share them with teachers, physicians and others who might be able to confirm or add important detail. If informal efforts to help the child overcome these difficulties is not successful (over a short period of time the next step is to initiate (in writing) a request to begin a formal evaluation process.

LD In Children

Early identification—the earlier, the better—is vital in helping a child to succeed academically and socially. Careful and honest observation is a key to understanding how well a child is progressing in their development of skills in important areas such as expressive and receptive language, fine and gross motor coordination, attention and socialization. Even preschoolers can show signs of risk for LD. And for some children, LD does not present itself until middle school or even high school.

Do you think your child is displaying signs of a learning disability? Don't panic. Not all children who are slow to develop skills have LD. Share your concerns with classroom teachers and others who come in contact with your child. And don't shy away from seeking more detail information and assistance. There is no shame in having a learning disability. The shame is knowing that there is a problem and not providing the help a child needs and deserves.

Once a child is found to have a learning disability, learn as much as possible about the types of supports that are available through school and in the community. Just as important, help the child to understand their specific challenges, assure them that LD is not an insurmountable hurdle and that they are not alone: other children struggle, too, and adults are there to help.

LD In Adults

It is never too late to identify and get help for a learning disability. Finding out about a learning disability can be a great relief to adults who could not explain the reason for their struggles in the past. Testing for LD in adulthood is not uncommon, and seeking support and services (a legal entitlement through the Americans with Disabilities Act is key to leading a successful and productive life.

Accommodations and Modifications

Once a learning disability is identified, different kinds of assistance can be provided. In addition to specialized, explicit types of instruction, children with LD are entitled to have accommodations (such as extended time, readers, and note-takers) or modifications (such as abbreviated tests or alternate assignments) as appropriate. These guarantees are afforded to children with LD by law.

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997 and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, people of all ages with LD—children and adults—are protected against discrimination and have a right to different forms of assistance in the classroom and workplace.

TYPES OF LD

Learning disabilities (LD) are neurological disorders that can make it difficult to acquire certain academic and social skills. They are not the result of poor intelligence or laziness. Knowledge about LD will allow you and your child to advocate for success in learning and in life. Find out more by exploring the sections below.

General LD Information

What is and isn't a learning disability (LD)? LD is more than a "difference" or "difficulty" with learning—it's a neurological disorder that affects the brain's ability to receive, process, store and respond to information. LD will vary in how it impacts each individual child, adolescent and adult. Understanding the basic facts will enable you to help yourself, your child, or someone you know to be a well-informed and effective advocate.

Dyslexia

As with other learning disabilities, dyslexia is a lifelong challenge. This language-based processing disorder can hinder reading, writing, spelling and sometimes even speaking. Dyslexia is not a sign of poor intelligence or laziness or the result of impaired hearing or vision. Children and adults with dyslexia have a neurological disorder that causes their brains to process and interpret information differently.

Dyscalculia

Dyscalculia refers to a wide range of lifelong learning disabilities involving math. There is no single type of math disability. Dyscalculia can vary from person to person, and it affects people differently at different stages of life. Work-around strategies and accommodations help lessen the obstacles that dyscalculia presents. And just like in the area of reading, math LD is not a prescription for failure.

Dysgraphia

Dysgraphia is a learning disability that affects writing, which requires a complex set of motor and information processing skills. It can lead to problems with spelling, poor handwriting and putting thoughts on paper. People with dysgraphia might have trouble organizing letters, numbers and words on a line or page.

Dyspraxia

Dyspraxia is a disorder that affects motor skill development. People with dyspraxia have trouble planning and completing fine motor tasks. This can vary from simple motor tasks such as waving goodbye to more complex tasks like brushing teeth. It is not a learning disability (LD) but often coexists with other LDs and conditions that impact learning.

Executive Functioning

Many people with LD struggle with executive function, which can make activities like planning, organizing, strategizing, remembering details and managing time and space difficult. Problems with executive function—a set of mental processes that helps connect past experience with present action—can be seen at any age and often contribute to the challenges individuals with LD face in academic learning

ADHD

What is Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and what does it have to do with learning disabilities (LD)? ADHD and LD are not the same thing, but ADHD certainly can interfere with learning and behavior. About one-third of people with LD have ADHD.

What's the Relationship Between ADHD and Executive Function?

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is one of the most frequently occurring brain-based disorders. It most often manifests itself in childhood and continues to pose challenges throughout adolescence and into adulthood. Its symptoms most often include difficulty getting and staying focused, modulating attention, controlling impulsivity and self-managing behavior. While these symptoms are directly related to the ways the brain works (think brain cells and neurotransmitters), there are specific sets of mental (thinking) skills that are *coordinated* with the way the brain works. These are commonly called "executive functions," and they involve things like organizing and planning, shifting attention, regulating emotions, self-monitoring and holding information in mind for easy recall. Executive functions are essential in virtually every aspect of our lives.

ADHD and Executive Function in Action Think about people you know who have ADHD. They're the ones who have trouble listening to or following instructions, who begin tasks and then are easily sidetracked, or who struggle to wait their turn. They sometimes blurt things out when they know better, touch things when asked not to, or don't delay reacting to something long enough to recall that they've been in similar situations before and are about to make a silly statement and embarrass themselves or others. What's going on inside

their brains when these things happen? Answer: a breakdown in executive functioning.

Executive function deficits are not only seen individuals with ADHD. People who have learning disabilities, communication disorders or mental health disorders (such as those characterized by anxiety or depression) are also prone to struggle with executive functioning challenges. This is also the case with people who have sustained brain injuries or have medical conditions (such as epilepsy) that result in compromised brain functioning.

To be sure there's no confusion about how executive functions work, it's important to keep in mind that these are skills and behaviors that everyone uses all the time! Let's consider one component of executive functioning called "working memory." Consider what happens when you need to hold information in your mind while simultaneously doing something else. If you manage to keep the first piece of information from slipping away, working memory is doing its job. Trying to remember an address while scanning a map, a new person's name immediately after being told their phone number, the number of calories or amount of fiber in a serving of one type of cereal after reading two or three different boxes—these are everyday examples of how working memory (and therefore, executive functioning) works.

Autism Spectrum Disorders

Individuals with learning disabilities (LD) and those with autism present very different profiles in terms of learning, attention and behavior. But just like LD, autism spectrum disorders (including Asperger's Syndrome) do not go away with time. Many individuals with LD struggle with some of the same types of challenges

Visual Processing Disorders

A visual processing disorder can cause difficulty in seeing the difference between two similar letters, shapes, or objects, or noticing the similarities and differences between certain colors, shapes and patterns. Although visual processing disorder is not named as learning

disability under federal law, it can explain why a child may have trouble with learning and performance.

There are lots of ways the brain processes visual information. Weaknesses in a particular kind of visual processing can often be seen in specific difficulties with practical, everyday tasks.

Below is an explanation of each of the types of visual processing. Each category also includes:

- Possible difficulties that can occur if there is a weakness in that area
- Possible strategies that may help overcome the difficulties.

Be aware that weakness can occur in one or more category at the same time.

It is also important to note that many people without any kind of visual processing disorder experience problems with learning and behavior from time to time. However, if a person consistently displays difficulties with these tasks over time, testing for visual processing disorders by trained professionals should be considered.

Visual Discrimination

The Skill—Using the sense of sight to notice and compare the features of different items to distinguish one item from another.

Difficulties Observed

- Seeing the difference between two similar letters, shapes or objects
- Noticing the similarities and differences between certain colors, shapes and patterns

Types of Helpful Strategies

- Clearly space words/problems on a page.
- Anticipate confusions and point out examples of correct responses.

Visual Figure-Ground Discrimination

The Skill—Discriminating a shape or printed character from its background.

Difficulties Observed

- Finding a specific bit of information on a printed page full of words and numbers
- Seeing an image within a competing background

Types of Helpful Strategies

- Practice with ‘find the item’ challenges, such as “Where’s Waldo?”
- Use an index card or marker when reading to blot out distraction of other words.
- Highlight useful information while reading.

Visual Sequencing

The Skill—The ability to see and distinguish the order of symbols, words or images.

Difficulties Observed

- Using a separate answer sheet
- Staying in the right place while reading a paragraph. Example: skipping lines, reading the same line over and over
- Reversing or misreading letters, numbers and words
- Understanding math equations

Types of Helpful Strategies

- Combine reading with oral presentation.

Visual Motor Processing

The Skill—Using feedback from the eyes to coordinate the movement of other parts of the body.

Difficulties Observed

- Writing within lines or margins of a piece of paper
- Copying from a board or book
- Moving around without bumping into things
- Participating in sports that require well-timed and precise movements in space

Types of Helpful Strategies

- Allow use of a computer.
- Allow use of a tape recorder for lectures.
- Substitute oral reports for written ones.
- Provide a “note buddy” to check that topic notes are clear and well-organized.

Visual Memory

The Skill— There are two kinds of visual memory.

- Long-term visual memory is the ability to recall something seen some time ago.
- Short-term visual memory is the ability to remember something seen very recently.

Difficulties Observed

- Remembering the spelling of familiar words with irregular spelling
- Reading comprehension

- Using a calculator or keyboard with speed and accuracy
- Remembering phone numbers

Types of Helpful Strategies

- Provide handouts that are clearly written.
- Provide oral instruction to reinforce written directions.

Visual Closure

The Skill—The ability to know what an object is when only parts of it are visible.

Difficulties Observed

- Recognizing a picture of a familiar object from a partial image.
Example: A truck without its wheels
- Identifying a word with a letter missing
- Recognizing a face when one feature (such as the nose) is missing

Types of Helpful Strategies

- Practice with jigsaw puzzles and rebus-type games.

Spatial Relationships

The Skill—The ability to understand how objects are positioned in space in relation to oneself. This involves the understanding of distance (near or far), as well as the relationship of objects and characters described on paper or in a spoken narrative.

Difficulties Observed

- Getting from one place to another
- Spacing letters and words on paper
- Judging time
- Reading maps

Types of Helpful Strategies

- Practice estimating distance with ball games and using a tape measure.
- Create maps and travel logs.
- Practice social skills that focus on judging appropriate physical proximity to others.

Basics You Should Know About Visual Processing Disorders

- Visual processing disorders are also known as visual perceptual processing disorders
- They affect how the brain perceives and processes what the eye sees.
- These disorders can occur without impaired vision of any kind.
- Like all learning disabilities, visual processing disorders can be a lifelong challenge.
- People with visual processing disorders have problems with the way they interpret information, but what others will notice in people with these disorders is the behavior that happens after the difficulties occur.
- There are several types of visual processing disorders, each affecting different aspects of visual information processing.

Visual Processing Disorders at Different Ages

Many people experience problems with learning and behavior occasionally, but if a person consistently displays difficulties with these tasks over time, testing for visual processing disorders by trained professionals should be considered.

Early Childhood

Common difficulties

- Misunderstanding or confusing written symbols (example: +, x, /, &)
- Easily distracted, especially by competing visual information

- Writing within margins or on lines or aligning numbers in math problems.
- Judging distances (example: bumping into things, placing objects too close to an edge)
- Fluidity of movement (example: getting out of the way of a moving ball, knocking things over)
- Differentiating colors or similarly shaped letters and numbers (example: b, d; p, q; 6,9; 2,5)

Accommodation and modification strategies

- Use books, worksheets and other materials with enlarged print.
- Read written directions aloud. Varying teaching methods (written and spoken words; images and sounds) can help promote understanding.
- Be aware of the weakness but don't overemphasize it. While helping a child work on the weakness is important; it is just as important to build other skills and function in any setting.
- Break assignments and chores into clear, concise steps. Often multiple steps can be difficult to visualize and complete.
- Give examples and point out the important details of visual information (the part of a picture that contains information for a particular question).
- Provide information about a task before starting to focus attention on the activity.

School-Age Children

Common difficulties

- Organizing and solving math problems
- Finding and retaining important information in reading assignments or tests
- Writing coherent, well-organized essays
- Copying from board or books
- Sewing or other types of fine motor activities
- Writing neatly and quickly
- Reading with speed and precision.

Accommodation and modification strategies

- Allow student to write answers on the same sheet of paper as the questions or offer opportunities for student to explain answers orally.
- Provide paper for writing and math work that has darker or raised lines to make the boundaries more distinct.
- Organize assignments to be completed in smaller steps instead of one large finished product.
- Use a ruler as a reading guide (to keep focus on one line at a time) and a highlighter (to immediately emphasize important information).
- Provide a tape recorder to supplement note-taking.
- Have a proofreading buddy for notes and essays.

Teenagers and Adults**Common difficulties**

- Accurately identifying information from pictures, charts, graphs, maps, etc.
- Organizing information from different sources into one cohesive document
- Finding specific information on a printed page (example: getting a number out of the phone book)
- Remembering directions to a location

Accommodation and modification strategies

- Color code important information.
- Have a proof-reading buddy for all written materials.
- Use a tape recorder when getting important information.
- Before writing letters or essays, create an outline to simplify and organize ideas.

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الملخص

تخيل وجود أفكار هامة و حاجة كبيرة للتواصل مع عدم القدرة على التعبير عنها. ربما بسبب تراكم الأصوات و المشاهد لا يمكنك قراءة أو إضافة أو تركيز انتباهك بل و عدم استطاعتك فهم الحروف و الأرقام.

لست بحاجة للتخيل، فقد تكون الأب أو المعلم أو الطفل الذي يواجه مشاكل أكاديمية ، أو قد يكون لديك شخص ما في عائلتك تم تشخيصه من ذوي صعوبات التعلم. أو ربما كطفل قيل لك أنه لديك مشكلة قراءة تسمى (ديسليكسيا) أو غيرها من مشاكل التعلم.

على الرغم من أنه يختلف من شخص لأخر، فإن هذه الصعوبات تشكل التجارب اليومية للعديد من ذوي صعوبات التعلم من الأطفال و المراهقين و البالغين و قد يواجه حلقة مفرغة من الفشل الدراسي و انخفاض احترام الذات (الدونية). و بالتالي فإن وجود هذه المعوقات أو معايشة شخص لديه تلك الصعوبات قد يجلب حالة من الإحباط الكبير.

لكن هناك أمل في الأفق. فمن المهم أن تعرف أن الشخص الذي يعاني من صعوبات التعلم يستطيع أن يتعلم . لأن العجز كثيراً ما يؤثر فقط على مناطق محددة من نمو الطفل .. وفي الواقع نادرة تلك الإعاقات التي تُضعف إمكانية أن يعيش صاحبها حياة طبيعية و سعيدة.