

## *Finding Solutions*

## *Recognizing Strengths*

### Signs of a learning disability

Before reaching the conclusion that your child has a learning disability, it is essential to rule out other possible factors that may contribute to his or her academic struggles. Physical problems (such as vision impairment, partial deafness, side effects of certain medications), premature birth, English as the child's second language, poor school attendance, frequent transitions, boredom, and problems with attention may account for learning problems. Often, teachers may recognize differences in your child's learning style that you don't notice at home.

Also, be careful not to rule out the possibility of a learning disability even when other factors may seem more relevant. For instance, learning disabilities often lead to behavioral problems when a child becomes so frustrated with learning that he or she gives up and disengages from classroom activities. This child may be labeled with a behavioral problem when an underlying learning disorder exists.

There are certain signs that a child may give to indicate the possibility of a learning disability. For example, some of the signs of dyslexia are:

**Reading:** Making up a story to an unfamiliar book instead of reading the words, reading slowly and hesitantly, leaving out words, phrases, or whole lines of the text, reversing the order of letters or syllables in a word, mispronouncing even familiar words, making up words that have no meaning, ignoring punctuation.

**Writing:** Leaving out or adding letters to words, writing letters in the wrong order, substituting one letter for another, and failing to use punctuation.

### How to get help

If your child or teenager has a learning disability, there are certain school accommodations that may be very helpful. For instance, a child with a handwriting disability may be able to supplement class notes with those of a friend, type on a laptop, or tape record classes and lectures. Children with dyslexia may need unique reading interventions, such as the use of phonics, either in school or with a tutor. Schools are very familiar with the kinds of accommodations that may be available, and will assist you with this the process.

There are strict federal and local criteria that define learning disabilities and that determine interventions based on certain tests that your child can take. So, you will first have to have your child formally evaluated. School districts are required to provide this testing, or you can seek an evaluation by a professional in the community. This evaluation should be very thorough and should consider other problems that may affect your child's learning (such as physical problems or anxiety). The results of this evaluation will then be used to develop a specific plan for your child (usually called an "IEP" or an "accommodation plan").

In addition to school interventions, there are many ways that you can assist your child or teenager with learning at home. Check out books in your local library on the specific learning style of your child, and ask professionals at your child's school for ideas about home interventions.

## *Responding to your child's needs*



## *Solving Problems*

## *Recognizing Strengths*

## *Finding Solutions*

## *Knowing the Facts*

## *Responding to your child's needs*



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## What is a learning disability?

A person may be diagnosed with a learning disability if he or she has difficulty with one or more aspects of learning. When people learn, they take in information (which is called information processing), where it is organized and stored in the brain for later use. People with learning disabilities may have difficulty perceiving, processing, organizing, storing, and/or using information. Each person's learning disability is unique and may involve more than one area of difficulty.

If your child has a learning disability, it does NOT mean that he or she is not smart. It means that there are discrepancies in the ways he or she learns different kinds of information. In fact, most people with learning disabilities have above average intelligence. Learning disabilities are relatively common. At least 1 in 10 children and teenagers suffer from a specific learning disability.



## Types of learning Disabilities

**Dyslexia:** Dyslexia is a reading disorder that affects between 5 - 10% of all children. Dyslexia affects phonological processing, or the ability to connect a written word with the sound of the word when it is spoken. Usually, children learn to read by recognizing words they first learned by ear when they began speaking. This process is much harder for children with dyslexia. Dyslexia is often noticed when a child cannot keep up with peers who have naturally learned word decoding strategies (usually at age 7 or 8). Older children with dyslexia have usually established some decoding strategies but may still have trouble with short-term memory, which then adds to difficulties with reading.

**Non-verbal learning disability:** This type of disability is also sometimes called "right-hemisphere learning disorder" because it is related to the right side of the brain. Non-verbal learning disabilities can affect coordination and fine motor skills, spatial relations, and social judgment and interactions. These children may struggle with new situations and transitions. Non-verbal learning disabilities may go undetected because they aren't as noticeable as verbal learning disabilities in the classroom. Children with non-verbal learning disabilities are often labeled with behavior problems or "emotional disturbance" because they may lack effective social skills. These children often excel in verbal tasks such as spelling and rote memory, so their other abilities are overestimated, leading to unrealistically high expectations and stress in the classroom.

## Other specific disabilities

Some other terms that may be used to describe learning disabilities are: **dysgraphia** (poor handwriting), **dyscalculia** (poor math abilities), and **dysorthographia** (poor spelling). While it is common for people with dyslexia to have trouble spelling, some children have dysorthographia alone. Also, while Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (**ADHD**) is a different disorder, it is sometimes categorized as a learning disability because it significantly affects the learning process.

## Causes of learning disabilities

There is some evidence that learning disabilities are hereditary. There are also several other factors that may contribute to learning disabilities. Naturally, there is a range of learning abilities in children, and some learning problems are natural in some children. Learning disabilities may also relate to problems with the structure and/or functioning of the brain, or immature development of learning skills (a child may "catch up" over time). Finally, there are other factors in the environment that may magnify learning problems (such as depression, anxiety, and frequent school changes or absences).