



Education

Learning Disabilities

What are learning disabilities?

If a child has average or above-average intelligence and is doing very poorly in school, he or she may have a learning disability (LD). There are many kinds of learning disabilities. Your child may have problems with listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or solving math problems.

What causes an LD?

The causes for most learning disabilities are not known. They tend to run in families. Learning disabilities may be caused by changes in brain chemicals or damage in certain parts of the brain.

Your child is more likely to have a learning disability if you had a problem during pregnancy, such as an infection, or used drugs or alcohol during pregnancy. LDs are also more common in children who:

- were premature, had low birth weight or had some other trauma during birth
- had certain conditions after birth (such as metabolic imbalances or infections)
- have a chronic illness, such as asthma or diabetes
- have a head injury
- have poor nutrition.

A child who has a learning disability may have other conditions, such as hearing problems or emotional problems. However, LDs are not caused by these conditions. They are also not caused by cultural differences or poor parenting.

What are signs of a learning disability?

There are many types of learning disabilities and they have a wide range of characteristics. Your child may have mild or severe problems. Your child may also have more than one LD. All learning-disabled children tend to have problems in school even though they have normal or above-normal intelligence. A child with an LD may have problems in one or many of the following areas:

Attention: Your child may have trouble paying attention, be impulsive, or get tired easily when trying to concentrate.

Language: Your child has trouble following directions and needs to have things repeated. He or she may use the wrong words or mix up words. Telling a story may be hard because the events get mixed up.

Temporal-spatial orientation: Your child has trouble understanding time (such as the difference between tomorrow and next week). He or she may have trouble with directions and often get lost.

Visual processing: Your child may see letters or words backwards (for example, may confuse b's and d's or read "was" as "saw"). Your child may write very slowly or have poor handwriting.

Auditory processing: Your child may have trouble focusing on important sounds instead of background noise. He or she may seem inattentive and have trouble following spoken instructions.

Memory: Your child has trouble remembering basic information like an address and phone number. It may be hard to remember multiplication tables or days of the week. Short-term memory may be a problem. Your child may forget classroom instructions or lose track while telling a story or having a conversation.

Motor control: Your child may have trouble with fine motor control. Your child may have a hard time doing buttons and zippers, or have trouble holding a pencil. If your child seems clumsy or awkward, he or she may have problems with gross motor control.

How do I find out if my child has an LD?

First you need to have your child evaluated. Ask your school to evaluate your child. You can also take your child to a private evaluator, but the school's testing may still be needed for your child to qualify for extra help at school. A team of people will test your child to find out exactly what the problems are and how to help your child. The evaluation includes testing and input from teachers and especially parents.

The team of people that may evaluate your child include a psychologist, a child psychiatrist, special education teacher, speech/language therapist, occupational therapist, physical therapist, social worker, or other health care providers.

Sometimes you are given one specific diagnosis. Other times it may be a combination of several learning disabilities. Some of the common disorders are:

- Reading disorder (dyslexia): Has trouble with reading.
- Written expression disorder (dysgraphia): Has trouble with handwriting and organizing writing.
- Mathematics disorder (dyscalculia): Has trouble with numbers and math skills.
- Nonverbal learning disorder: Has problems with things such as understanding gestures and facial expressions.
- Sensory integration disorder: Has trouble with fine or large motor skills and may be sensitive to touch, light, sounds, or smells.
- Auditory processing disorder: Has trouble remembering what was said.
- Visual perception disorder: Has trouble with copying words and may reverse letters.
- Language disorder: Has trouble understanding spoken language and may also have trouble with reading or writing.
- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD): Has trouble staying focused and paying attention. May also be hyperactive.

How does my child get extra help at school?

The results of the testing will determine whether your child can have special education services provided at school. Some services are only given if your child has a certain diagnosis. Ask your school which disorders they provide special services for. Once you understand the problem you can help the school develop an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP). Parents must help write and agree with the IEP. The IEP must outline:

- your child's current performance
- specific special education services and who will provide them
- short-term objectives and yearly goals
- ways to test and measure your child's progress toward these goals each year.

To get the best help for your child, you must work closely with the other team members. If you hear something surprising about your child or strongly disagree with the conclusions of the test, services, or therapies, voice your concerns at the IEP meeting. Signing the IEP means that you agree to the services, goals, and other matters listed in it.

If the school cannot offer special services, you can look for help from private tutors, learning centers, psychologists, and others to help with your child's specific problem. Even if your child is not on an IEP or in special education classes, your child's teacher can probably still make adjustments to assignments and help your child in the best way possible. Make sure you talk to your child's teacher.

What can I do to help?

Depending on the disability, there are many specific ways to help your child at home. But no matter what disability your child has it is very important to do the following:

- **Build your child's self esteem.** Children who are not doing well in school may not feel good about themselves. If they feel they can't cope with the demands of the people around them, they may withdraw from their friends and social activities. It is important for these children to understand that they are smart and that they just have a different way of learning. That is why learning disabilities are also called learning differences.
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Many smart and creative people have had learning disabilities, such as Walt Disney, Albert Einstein, and Alexander Graham Bell. Your child needs you to accept his condition. Give unconditional love and support. You can build up your child's self-esteem by consistently reminding him of his strengths. Your child may need counseling to help change views and expectations about themselves.

- **Help your child to understand his problem.** Talk about the problem. Help your child can focus on coping skills rather than feeling like he or she is the problem. Sometimes talking with other children who also have a LD can help. Children may feel better if they realize they are not alone.
- **Provide an educationally nurturing home environment.** Provide an organized place and time for study. Also, a balanced diet, enough rest, play activities, and family outings will strengthen your child's body and mind.
- **Communicate with the school.** Stay in close touch with your child's teachers, therapists, and other caregivers. Let your child's teacher know that you want to play an active role in your child's education. Ask how you can reinforce and expand on what is taught in class, both behaviorally and academically.
- **Seek professional counseling for yourself as well as your child.** Most parents find advice on handling difficult behavior and feelings very helpful.
- **Join LD associations and support groups.** These groups help keep you up to date with the latest information. It will also put you in touch with parents who have children with similar problems.
- **Be cautious of nontraditional treatments.** Be sure to check with your health care provider before giving supplements, changing to a special diet, or using other kinds of alternative treatments.
- **Give your child medicine, if needed.** Medicines are sometimes used, especially if your child has attention problems. Parents and teachers can give feedback to the health care provider about how it seems to be working.

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