

Learning Disabilities

How Common Are Learning Disabilities?

Parents are often worried and disappointed when their child has problems learning in school. There are many reasons for failure in school; a common one is a specific learning disability. A child with a learning disability is usually bright and initially tries very hard to follow instructions, concentrate, and "be good" at home and in school. Yet despite this effort, he or she is not mastering school tasks and falls behind. Some learning disabled children also have trouble sitting still or paying attention.

Learning disabilities affect as many as 15 percent of otherwise able schoolchildren.

What Causes Learning Disabilities?

It is believed that learning disabilities are caused by a difficulty with the nervous system that affects receiving, processing, or communicating information. Some learning disabled children are also hyperactive, easily distracted, and have a short attention span.

Early Detection and Treatment is Important

Child and adolescent psychiatrists point out that learning disabilities are treatable, but if not detected and treated early, they can have a serious "snowballing" effect. For instance, a child who does not learn addition in elementary school cannot understand algebra in high school. The child, trying very hard to learn, becomes more and more frustrated, and develops emotional problems such as low self-esteem in the face of repeated failure. Some learning disabled children misbehave in school because they would rather be seen as "bad" than "stupid."

Warning Signs

Parents should be aware of the most frequent signals of learning disabilities.

Does your child:

- Have difficulty understanding and following instructions
- Have trouble remembering what someone just told him or her
- Fail to master reading, writing, and/or math skills, and thus fails schoolwork
- Have difficulty distinguishing right from left, for example, confusing 25 with 52, "b" with "d," or "on" with "no"
- Lack coordination in walking, sports, or small activities such as holding a pencil or tying a shoelace
- Easily lose or misplace homework, schoolbooks, or other items
- Not understand the concept of time; is confused by "yesterday," "today," and "tomorrow"

Work With A Mental Health Professional

Such problems deserve a comprehensive evaluation by an expert who can assess all of the different issues affecting the child. A child and adolescent psychiatrist can help coordinate the evaluation and work with school professionals and others to evaluate and test your child to determine if a learning disability exists. After talking with the child and family, the education test is reviewed, and the

school consulted. At this point, the psychiatrist will make recommendations on appropriate school placement and the need for special help (such as educational therapy, speech-language therapy). The parents are also involved to assist their child in maximizing his or her learning potential.

Treatment for Learning Disabilities

Sometimes individual or family psychotherapy ("talking" about your child's problems) is recommended. Psychotherapy may help to strengthen your child's self-confidence; this is vital for healthy development. Therapy also helps parents, and other family members, better understand and cope with the realities of living with a child who has a learning disability. Medication may be prescribed for hyperactivity or distractibility.

For More Information:

For a free and confidential mental health screening, go on-line to www.mhacolorado.org.

Learning Disabilities Resources

30 Summit Grove Ave
PO Box 716
Bryn Mawr, PA 19010
Phone: (800) 869-8336

Learning Disabilities Association of America

4156 Library Rd
Pittsburgh, PA 15234
Phone: (412) 341-1515

Stigma Watch Line

800-969-NMHA
TTY line 800-433-5959

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

3615 Wisconsin Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20016
Phone 800-333-7636