

LEARNING DISABILITIES INFORMATION FOR TEENS THIRD EDITION

**Health Tips about Academic Skills Disorders and Other Disabilities
That Affect Learning**

**Including Information about Common Signs of Learning Disabilities, School
Issues, Career Options, Employment Support, and Learning to Live with a
Learning Disability and Other Related Issues**



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CHAPTER 6

WHAT IS A LEARNING DISABILITY?

About This Chapter: This chapter includes text excerpted from “About Learning Disabilities,” *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), September 11, 2018.

Learning disabilities affect how a person learns to read, write, speak, and do math. They are caused by differences in the brain, most often in how it functions but also sometimes in its structure. These differences affect the way the brain processes information.

Learning disabilities are often discovered once a child is in school and has learning difficulties that do not improve over time. A person can have more than one learning disability. Learning disabilities can last a person’s entire life, but she or he can still be successful with the right educational supports.

Types of Learning Disabilities

Some of the most common learning disabilities are the following:

- **Dyslexia.** People with dyslexia have problems with reading words accurately and with ease (sometimes called “fluency”) and may have a hard time spelling, understanding sentences, and recognizing words they already know.
- **Dysgraphia.** People with dysgraphia have problems with their handwriting. They may have trouble forming letters, writing within a defined space, and writing down their thoughts.
- **Dyscalculia.** People with this math learning disability may have difficulty understanding arithmetic concepts and doing addition, multiplication, and measuring.

A learning disability is not an indication of a person’s intelligence. Learning disabilities are different from learning problems due to intellectual and developmental disabilities, or emotional, vision, hearing, or motor skills problems.

- **Apraxia of speech.** This disorder involves problems with speaking. People with this disorder have trouble saying what they want to say. It is sometimes called “verbal apraxia.”
- **Central auditory processing disorder.** People with this condition have trouble understanding and remembering language-related tasks. They have difficulty explaining things, understanding jokes, and following directions. They confuse words and are easily distracted.
- **Nonverbal learning disorders.** People with these conditions have strong verbal skills but difficulty understanding facial expression and body language. They are clumsy and have trouble generalizing and following multistep directions.

Because there are many different types of learning disabilities, and some people may have more than one, it is hard to estimate how many people might have learning disabilities.

CHAPTER 7

WHAT ARE SOME COMMON SIGNS OF LEARNING DISABILITIES?

About This Chapter: Text in this chapter begins with excerpts from “What Are Some Signs of Learning Disabilities?” *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), September 11, 2018; Text under the heading “What Causes Learning Disabilities” is excerpted from “What Causes Learning Disabilities?” *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), September 11, 2018; Text under the heading “How Are Learning Disabilities Diagnosed?” © 2016 Omnigraphics. Reviewed July 2020.

Many children have trouble reading, writing, or performing other learning-related tasks at some point. This does not mean they have learning disabilities (LDs). A child with an LD often has several related signs, and they do not go away or get better over time. The signs of LDs vary from person to person.

Please note that the generally common signs included here are for informational purposes only; the information is not intended to screen for LDs in general or for a specific type of LD.

Common Signs of Learning Disabilities

Common signs that a person may have LDs include the following:

- Problems reading and/or writing
- Problems with math
- Poor memory
- Problems paying attention
- Trouble following directions
- Clumsiness
- Trouble telling time
- Problems staying organized

A child with an LD also may have one or more of the following:

- Acting without really thinking about possible outcomes (impulsiveness)
- “Acting out” in school or social situations
- Difficulty staying focused; being easily distracted
- Difficulty saying a word correctly out loud or expressing thoughts
- Problems with school performance from week to week or day to day
- Speaking such as a younger child; using short, simple phrases; or leaving out words in sentences
- Having a hard time listening
- Problems dealing with changes in schedule or situations
- Problems understanding words or concepts

These signs alone are not enough to determine that a person has an LD. Only a professional can diagnose an LD.

Each LD has its own signs. A person with a particular disability may not have all of the signs of that disability.

Children being taught in a second language may show signs of learning problems or an LD. The LD assessment must take into account whether a student is bilingual or a second language learner. In addition, for English-speaking children, the assessment should be sensitive to differences that may be due to dialect, a form of a language that is specific to a region or group.

Below are some common LDs and the signs associated with them:

Dyslexia

People with dyslexia usually have trouble making the connection between letters and sounds and with spelling and recognizing words.

People with dyslexia often show other signs of the condition. These may include:

- Having a hard time understanding what others are saying
- Difficulty organizing written and spoken language
- Delay in being able to speak
- Difficulty expressing thoughts or feelings
- Difficulty learning new words (vocabulary), either while reading or hearing
- Trouble learning foreign languages
- Difficulty learning songs and rhymes
- Slow rate of reading, both silently and out loud
- Giving up on longer reading tasks
- Difficulty understanding questions and following directions
- Poor spelling
- Problems remembering numbers in sequence (e.g., telephone numbers and addresses)
- Trouble telling left from right

Dysgraphia

A child who has trouble writing or has very poor handwriting and does not outgrow it may have dysgraphia. This disorder may cause a child to be tense and twist awkwardly when holding a pen or pencil.

Other signs of this condition may include:

- A strong dislike of writing and/or drawing
- Problems with grammar
- Trouble writing down ideas
- Losing energy or interest as soon as they start writing
- Trouble writing down thoughts in a logical sequence
- Saying words out loud while writing
- Leaving words unfinished or omitting them when writing sentences

Dyscalculia

Signs of this disability include problems understanding basic arithmetic concepts, such as fractions, number lines, and positive and negative numbers.

Other symptoms may include:

- Difficulty with math-related word problems
- Trouble making change in cash transactions
- Messiness in putting math problems on paper
- Trouble with logical sequences (e.g., steps in math problems)
- Trouble understanding the time sequence of events
- Trouble describing math processes

What Causes Learning Disabilities

Researchers do not know all of the possible causes of LDs, but they have found a range of risk factors during their work to find potential causes. Research shows that risk factors may be present from birth and tend to run in families. In fact, children who have a parent with an LD are more likely to develop an LD themselves. To better understand LDs, researchers are studying how children's brains learn to read, write, and develop math skills. Researchers are working on interventions to help address the needs of those who struggle with reading the most, including those with LDs, to improve learning and overall health.

Factors that affect a fetus developing in the womb, such as alcohol or drug use, can put a child at higher risk for a learning problem or disability. Other factors in an infant's environment may play a role, too. These can include poor nutrition or exposure to lead in water or in paint. Young children who do not receive the support they need for their intellectual development may show signs of LDs once they start school.

Sometimes a person may develop an LD later in life due to injury. Possible causes in such a case include dementia or a traumatic brain injury (TBI).

Alcohol can cause alterations in the structure and function of the developing brain, which continues to mature into a person's mid-20s, and it may have consequences reaching far beyond adolescence.

In adolescence, brain development is characterized by dramatic changes to the brain's structure, neuron connectivity (i.e., "wiring"), and physiology. These changes in the brain affect everything from emerging sexuality to emotionality and judgment.

(Source: "Alcohol and the Developing Brain," Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA))

How Are Learning Disabilities Diagnosed?

Diagnosing LDs is difficult because LDs show up differently in different people and an LD in one area may be masked by accelerated ability in another. For instance, a child who has dyscalculia may not know how to add two numbers, but may write at a much higher grade level, leading teachers to think she or he is just being lazy about turning in her or his math homework.

Diagnosing Learning Disabilities in School-Aged Children and Adolescents

Learning disabilities often become evident when a child starts school. Teachers and other school professionals may identify students with suspected LDs as they monitor the students' progress and their response to educational assistance. This is called the "response to intervention" (RTI) process. Parents may also bring their concerns about LDs in their children to the attention of school professionals.

If a student is suspected of having LDs, further testing and evaluation will be needed.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) sets out clear rules and regulations on the process for evaluating children suspected of having LDs, so that students with LDs can take advantage of individualized educational plans (IEPs) when warranted. Under IDEA, an evaluation must be "full and individual" meaning it needs to be comprehensive in scope but tailored to the student as a distinct individual. Tests must be given in the language and at the level that the student understands best. Tests must investigate all the skills where the student has difficulty. The results must give relevant information to make informed decisions on the next steps in the student's educational plan.

In addition, the school staff must create an evaluation plan that informs the parents of all tests, observations, records they plan to use in the evaluation as well as providing the names of all evaluators.

The evaluation may include:

- **A physical examination** that looks for physical causes of LD such as vision, hearing, movement, or other health issues.
- **A psychological evaluation** to examine the student's emotional health and social skills, and determine how the student learns best.

What Does It Mean

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a law ensuring services to children with disabilities throughout the nation. IDEA governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education and related services to more than 6.5 million eligible infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities.

The Individualized Education Program (IEP) creates an opportunity for teachers, parents, school administrators, related services personnel, and students (when appropriate) to work together to improve educational results for children with disabilities. The IEP is the cornerstone of a quality education for each child with a disability.

(Sources: “Building the Legacy: IDEA 2004,” U.S. Department of Education (ED); “A Guide to the Individualized Education Program,” U.S. Department of Education (ED))

- **Interviews** with the student, parents, and teachers to learn more about the student’s academic history, behavior in and out of school, and other information that can help the evaluators with their diagnosis.
- **Behavioral assessment** is often accomplished using questionnaires filled out by teachers and parents about how the student interacts with the world in both normal and unusual situations.
- **Observation of the student** by teachers, the school psychologist, reading specialist, speech-language pathologist, and other educational professionals.
- **Standardized tests that** are selected by educational professionals based on the student’s areas of strengths and weaknesses. These tests can test general ability or specific skills.
 - **Intelligence and achievement tests** are used to measure the student’s intellectual potential, what she or he knows and can do, and areas of the student’s strengths and weaknesses. There are a variety of standard intelligence and achievement tests geared to a person’s age. The evaluators then use the results of these tests to focus on what further testing needs to done.
 - **Tests for reading, writing, and math** can include those that measure reading comprehension to determine the grade level at which a student should be taught; essential reading skills; oral reading (can the student read a passage aloud then answer questions on it?); pronunciation; general math skills.
 - **Tests for language, motor, and processing skills** look at issues that affect a student’s learning skills. Results of this type of test may suggest problems with perception, memory, planning, motor skills, attention, and comprehension of both written and spoken communications.
- **Other information already on file** including report cards and state test scores.

Based on the results of the evaluation, the school's IEP administrator will work with the student's teachers and family to draw up a plan of study to accommodate the student's LDs and determine strategies for effective learning and living.

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