

Learning Disabilities and Children



What is a learning disability?

During the preschool years, children undergo rapid change and growth—physically, mentally, and emotionally. And they do this at different rates. So it is important to know whether they are ready and able to succeed in school. There are many reasons why they may not be able to learn, such as:

- hearing problems
- poor motivation
- emotional problems
- mental retardation

Some school-age children with none of the above problems still have trouble in a school setting. These children may have normal, near normal, or above normal intelligence. This inability to reach their full potential is called a **learning disability**.

In many cases, the cause of a learning disability is not known. Experts believe that children with learning disabilities have a problem with the way the brain handles information. This hinders the normal learning process. Learning disabilities often make children feel bad about themselves. Parents need to understand this and provide their children with love and support.

The problem they are going through is similar to a distorted television picture caused by “technical problems” at the station. There is nothing wrong with the TV camera at the station or the TV set in your home. Yet, the picture is not clear. Something in the internal workings of the TV station prevents it from presenting a good picture.

There may be nothing wrong with the way children with learning disabilities take in information. Their senses of sight and sound are fine. The problem occurs in the brain **after** the eyes or ears have done their job. For example, it is easy to blame reading difficulties on the eyes. But, **visual problems do not cause learning disabilities**. Children with learning disabilities have no greater rate of eye problems than the rest of the population.

This problem in brain function delays the normal learning process. For this reason, it requires special teaching methods. A learning disability is not just a minor problem that simply goes away as children mature. A learning disability must be identified and treated early. If it is, there's a greater chance that children with learning disabilities will reach their potential. If it isn't, it could lead to major emotional problems causing depression and withdrawal. Both factors are linked to school failure.

Learning disabilities are not uncommon. They appear to be more common in boys than girls. More than 1 out of 10 public school students may be in need of special education. Of these, about half have some type of learning disability.

What are the causes of learning disabilities?

Some children are born into families with a history of learning disabilities. Others have risk factors that may make them more likely to have learning disabilities. These risk factors include:

- low birth weight
- stress before or after birth
- treatment for cancer or leukemia
- infections of the central nervous system
- severe head injuries

What are some common problems these children experience?

At an early age, children with potential learning disabilities may define and translate symbols differently. They often do not understand what they see or hear. Some cannot grasp how letters make up words, how words make up sentences, and how sentences make up thoughts. Structured writings appear foreign. Experts use the term **perceptual disability** to describe these problems. Perceptual problems may affect how children follow oral instructions, copy from the blackboard, or recall what a teacher or parent has said. These children may often have problems organizing their assignments at school and at home.

What are the warning signs?

It may not be easy to detect learning disabilities in children. This type of problem does not reveal itself in a day or a week. There are warning signs, however, that can help parents know if their children have a learning disability. Parents should note if any of the situations listed below are present in their preschool children:

Delays in language development. By 2 1/2 years old, children should be able to put sentences together.

Trouble with speech. By 3 years old, parents and others should understand what children say more than half of the time.

Trouble with coordination. Just before kindergarten, children should be able to tie shoes, button, hop, and cut.

Short attention span. Between 3 and 5 years old, children should be able to sit still while being read a short story. (Attention span should increase with age during this period.)

Regard these signs as risk factors only. Remember that no child develops in the same manner or at the same pace. These signs may not always reveal a learning disability. If you have any questions about the proper activities for your child's age, talk to your pediatrician.

When is the best time to diagnose/identify a learning disability?

The sooner it is detected, the sooner these children can receive special attention and treatment. In past generations, learning disabilities often were not recognized. Many people struggled and few learned to adjust to their weaknesses. Those who weren't able to adjust suffered frustration and endured a series of life-long failures. This sometimes led to school dropout, delinquency, and unemployment.

Children with undiagnosed learning disabilities could become angry and frustrated. This can lead to severe emotional problems. They often think they are dumb, although their intelligence is often above normal. Aggressive behavior, withdrawal, or depression could result. This, in turn, could worsen the existing trouble with reading, writing, spelling, or math.

Early treatment and special education can have a good effect on these children. Family love and support play major roles in helping children live with their learning disability. Such caring by parents helps children feel better about themselves. It also gives children a greater sense of confidence and inner strength. They need this now as well as later in life.

Who is most likely to suspect a learning disability?

The people who have the most contact with the children are parents, preschool teachers, or pediatricians. Doctors or teachers can give screening tests to see if a problem exists. The pediatrician can help the parents decide if further evaluation is needed. This may include an eye exam by a doctor (ophthalmologist), a psychological exam by a psychologist, an ear exam by an ear/nose/throat doctor, or a language assessment by a speech and language clinician. Federal laws require that schools test and help all children with language and/or learning disabilities. These tests are at no cost to parents. New laws ensure diagnostic and remedial services to all children from birth to 21 years of age.

Are there cures for learning disabilities?

There is no cure for a learning disability. Despite the many frustrations, proper help from a number of professionals can make the difference. Children may learn to achieve and lead a fruitful life in spite of their disability.

There are people and groups who offer simple answers or solutions for learning disabilities. Be cautious of these claims. Some allege that visual treatments can help although **no data support this theory**. Others believe in special diets and exercise. Still others claim certain vitamins will provide children's bodies with a needed balance and cure the problem. Keep in mind there is no guidance to support any of these treatments. There are no quick fixes for a learning disability. Dealing with this problem is tough. It's often a lifelong battle.

What's the outlook like today for children with a learning disability?

Early identification and treatment cannot be stressed enough. With the proper help, children with learning disabilities can become quite successful later in life. Famous Americans with learning disabilities include: inventor Thomas Edison, Vice President Nelson Rockefeller, scientist Albert Einstein, and athlete Bruce Jenner. These people rose above their disability and went on to achieve great personal and national goals.

People who learn to overcome their disability can do great things in life. For children with a learning disability, nothing can replace a good educational program and proper medical management. As important are loving and supportive parents, family, and friends.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

From your doctor

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