

Learning Disabilities and Young Adults



Experts estimate that as many as 12 percent of all school-aged youths in elementary, junior high and high school have some type of learning problem. These students may have emotional problems, poor hearing or vision problems; they also could be developmentally delayed. Other young people who do not face these obvious stumbling blocks still fail to do well in school or at work. These teens and young adults may have an unrecognized learning disability.

This brochure explains some of the different types of learning disabilities and how to help your learning-disabled teen or young adult cope with these problems. It also explains the training and education options that are available so your son or daughter can learn valuable job skills and work around a disability.

What is a learning disability?

Experts say that learning disabilities are due to problems with the way the brain handles information. Having a disability means that learning is difficult despite a person's best attempts. The good news is that many of these problems can be overcome by using different skills. Many learning-disabled people have made their mark in science, the arts and other fields. Albert Einstein is a good example. He learned new skills to solve problems.

Many learning-disabled youths may have normal or above-average intelligence. However, these teens may have a hard time working with written figures, spoken ideas, or certain letters and words. A student may have a hard time knowing how letters make up words, how words combine to create sentences and how sentences express thoughts. This can lead to problems with reading, spelling, writing and math.

What causes a learning disability?

A number of different factors may lead to a learning disability, such as inherited (genetic) health problems, low birth weight in ill babies or harmful environmental conditions. However, the causes are often unknown. Despite these problems, children with a disability can lead a normal life.

Experts look for early signals of a disability, including:

- failing to follow directions and appearing to “forget” what a parent or teacher says
- constant daydreaming or taking an unusually long time to finish a task
- problems organizing work at home and school

Some learning-disabled people may have several disabilities that combine to worsen the problem. For example, these students may:

- fail to learn facts and information
- handle assignments poorly
- have problems relating with peers
- not understand jokes, subtle responses or facial expressions
- have trouble paying attention or may be overactive
- feel bad about themselves

As a result, they could become unsure or uneasy in school. On the job, these workers may:

- fail to finish projects that require reading or math skills
- seem to “forget” what people say
- not understand a request
- clash with other workers

If your teen or young adult has problems like these, you should contact teachers, your pediatrician or other professionals who can help. Experts can identify the problem and find ways to help.

Building on strengths

Your teen has special talents as well as weaknesses. He may be good at math, music or sports, or he could be skilled at art or working with tools. Finding special strengths, and learning to use them, is hard work. It may be difficult for him to accept and work around a weak point. Encourage your son to use his strengths to explore and meet new challenges. This can help him develop new skills.

Developing social skills

The teen years are an awkward time of change. A learning disability can make growing up even harder, because being like other youths is important for your teen. Disabilities combined with the pain of growing up can make your teen sad, angry or withdrawn. Talking about the problem may be difficult.

In groups, a learning-disabled worker or student may be shy. Many learning-disabled youths have above average intelligence and special skills that others may not have. Your family can help by pointing out that a learning disability is not tied to how smart she is. Family members also can help by finding clubs and teams that stress friendship and fun, instead of just winning.

Your teen's pediatrician can help with tests that identify a disability. The doctor also may refer your teen to other medical specialists. Depending on what your teen's needs are, she may be referred to a pediatric neurologist, a behavioral pediatrician, a psychiatrist, a psychologist or an educator. Look for local groups in your state for support and information on learning disabilities.

Look for opportunities

Start planning for adulthood. Your child must make career and education choices during the school years. Most schools have special classes to teach your learning-disabled youth the right skills for the work force and/or higher education.

Find a specialist who can help. Teachers, employers, and college and job counselors can encourage your son or daughter to tap into special skills and cope with weak points.

Look for career search programs. These programs teach the skills that are necessary for teens to succeed in the workplace. Many career search programs include aptitude tests to help youths find the right talents and choose a career. A good program teaches useful job skills and also shows the value of self-esteem and decision-making skills.

Vocational programs. These programs teach young people how to apply for a job, accept directions, and get along with family, friends and coworkers.

Some high schools and colleges have programs to help learning-disabled students learn new skills. Counselors can direct students to tutors, study groups or graduate assistants who are willing to help.

Types of learning disabilities

Dyslexia is a term that describes serious problems with reading. With this problem, your child may not understand letters, groups of letters, sentences or paragraphs.

At the beginning of first grade, children may occasionally reverse and rotate the letters they read and write. This may be normal when first learning to read. By the middle of first grade (and with maturity) these problems disappear.

However, a young student with dyslexia (reading disabilities) may not overcome these problems. The difficulty can continue as the student gets older.

- To her, a “b” may look like a “d.”
- She may write “on,” when she really means “no.”
- Your daughter may reverse a “6” to make “9.”

This is not a vision problem. The problem involves how the brain interprets the information it “sees.”

Dysgraphia is a term for problems with writing. With this problem, your teen may not form letters correctly, and there is difficulty writing within a certain space. Writing neatly takes time and effort. But despite the extra effort, handwriting still may be hard to read.

A teacher may say that a learning-disabled student can't finish written tests and assignments on time. Supervisors may find that written tasks are always late or incomplete.

Dyscalculia is a term for problems doing math. With this problem, your teen may not grasp math concepts. He may do well in history and language, but he may fail tests involving fractions and percentages. Math is difficult for many students. But with dyscalculia, a young person may have a much more difficult time doing math than others his age. Dyscalculia may prevent your teen from solving basic math problems that others his age complete with no difficulty.

Auditory memory and processing disabilities is a term for problems understanding and remembering words or sounds. Your daughter may hear normally, but she may not remember key facts because her memory does not store and interpret facts correctly. This is not caused by a hearing problem. It happens when the brain fails to understand words or sounds the right way.

Parents, teachers and pediatricians usually detect learning disabilities during the school years, but a problem may not surface until the teen years. It's important to remember that it's never too late to get help.

Communication is the key that opens the door to the working world. You can help your young adult land that first job by helping him practice for interviews, choose the right clothes to wear and maintain a positive point of view. With a little coaching, he can build self-esteem and become a successful worker.

Coping on the job

Choose the right career. Your young adult can find and hold a good job. Landing the right job increases her chance of success—especially if the work is rewarding. Handling on-the-job tasks will help her deal with problem situations and build self-esteem.

Ask for help. Hiding a disability can make a situation worse. It pays to ask questions. When your teen asks at work—and a supervisor is willing to help—a job can open new doors of opportunity.

It's the law. Federal law forbids discrimination against disabled persons in the workplace. Some employers know that it's good business to provide the help that learning-disabled people need. During an interview, an employer may ask to see written proof of a disability from a pediatrician or some other professional.

Continuing education

Learning disabilities are not tied to intelligence, which is why some learning-disabled students can perform well in high school and college. If your teen has not completed high school, he should try to obtain the Graduate Equivalency Diploma (GED). Ask a counselor for help. A counselor may be able to recommend a tutor who works with the learning disabled. Passing the GED test will make a learning-disabled youth confident during job interviews and help him land a good job. Some young adults choose to attend a trade school or junior college after high school. Other students may complete a two-year community college program and then move on to a four-year school. Many learning-disabled students can meet the entrance requirements for a four-year college. These schools usually expect all young adults to meet the same standards. This includes high school grade point averages and ACT and/or SAT scores.

Some colleges have special testing and admissions policies for the learning disabled, such as SAT or ACT tests that are not timed. To apply to special college programs, students usually need written proof of a disability and recommendations from teachers and counselors.

College is hard work. Your young adult can meet this challenge by carefully arranging schedules and asking others for help. Tutors usually are available for specific classes, and more and more colleges have writing clinics to help students develop communications skills.

It's also very important to notify the admissions counselor if your son or daughter has a disability. Ask about special classes for the learning disabled. Many community colleges have programs aimed at skills, such as aviation technology, auto mechanics, computer technology, electronics and cosmetology. In these programs, students learn valuable skills that help them find a job. With all the facts, a student can decide if the college has the right programs and services for him or her.

Support from friends and family is vital

Whether at work or school, it's important to praise your son or daughter for doing a good job. But if he or she fails, coaching and support from family and friends is very important.

Coping with a learning disability is a lifelong job. It's a full-time job for your teen's friends and family members, too. With the right support from friends and family, your teen can build a positive self-esteem despite the occasional setbacks. Without support, a learning disability is much harder to cope with.

Friends and family can help by working on new solutions, providing new challenges, offering praise when it is due and encouraging learning disabled teens.

Written reminders, quiet study areas and scheduled study times are great ways to learn the right skills for the workplace.

Hard work leads to success

People from all walks of life have overcome disabilities to become very successful. Some of the success stories include singer/actress Cher; actors Harry Anderson and Tom Cruise; inventor Thomas Edison; former Vice President Nelson Rockefeller; baseball pitcher Nolan Ryan; Olympic diver Greg Louganis; and former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill.

Your pediatrician, together with educators and other professionals, can help with early detection of a learning disability. Contact a pediatrician if you have other questions, and remember the following tips:

- Promote a positive self-image.
- Emphasize your teen's best assets.
- Work with your child to help him/her develop compensation skills.
- Be patient, and never demand that your teen complete a task that is too difficult for him/her.
- Work with useful aids such as calculators, word processors, tape recorders and typewriters.
- Know what kind of help is available through schools and employers.
- Practice skills at home.
- Find a tutor or a training program
- Seek a quiet, distraction-free place to study.
- Talk to counselors and set reasonable goals.
- Learn what rights a disabled person has under the law.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions or find help; it's never too late.

For more information on learning disabilities, refer to the following resources:

- Learning Disabilities Association of America
4156 Library Rd
Pittsburgh, PA 15234
412/341-1515
- HEATH Resource Center
(The National Clearinghouse on
Postsecondary Education for Individuals With Disabilities)
One Dupont Circle
Suite 800
Washington, DC 20036
800/544-3284
- National Information Center for Children and Youths With Disabilities
(NICHCY)
PO Box 1492
Washington, DC 20013
800/999-5599
- Mangrum CT, Strichart SS, Peterson's Guide to Colleges With Programs
for Learning-Disabled Students, Peterson's Guide, Inc.,
Princeton, NJ: 1988.

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

American Academy
of Pediatrics



The American Academy of Pediatrics is an organization of 57,000 primary care pediatricians, pediatric medical subspecialists, and pediatric surgical specialists dedicated to the health, safety, and well-being of infants, children, adolescents, and young adults.

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