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Learning Disabilities

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Summary: A learning disability (LD) is a type of learning problem where a person with average or above-average abilities for thinking and reasoning has trouble learning certain skills, such as math or reading.

Lynn's story

Lynn is a typical 10 year old who likes sports and hanging out with her friends. She is an average student, getting B's in all subjects, except for math… Math has always been tough for her compared to other subjects. But this year, she's been failing all her math classes. Even when she asks her teacher for help, she still doesn't understand. Her dad thinks, 'Well, I wasn't good at math either, so that's why she's failing'. Her mom thinks that Lynn is being lazy and she should just 'work harder'. Is Lynn's trouble with math because she is lazy or because she has her dad's bad math gene? Or could it be something else…?

What is a learning disability (LD)?

A learning disability (LD) is a kind of learning problem. It happens when a person with average or above-average abilities for thinking and reasoning has trouble learning certain skills.

A learning disability:

- Is a specific difficulty in one area (for example, math or reading);
- Can range from mild to severe;
- Is not the same as an intellectual (thinking) disability (which was called mental retardation in the past). An intellectual disability causes learning problems in many areas.

If my child has trouble learning, does that mean she has a learning disability?

She might, but she might not. There can be many causes for learning problems, like:

- Learning disabilities;
- Lower intellectual ability (problems with thinking and reasoning in many areas);
- Stresses like emotional or behavioural problems.

Types of learning disabilities

1. Academic skills

Children and youth with academic learning disabilities can have problems with:

- Reading (phonics, recognizing words or understanding printed text)
- Writing (spelling, creating sentences, grammar, using punctuation, expressing thoughts in writing)
- Math (reasoning, functions like adding, subtracting, multiplying and dividing)

2. Organization and Focus

These ‘executive functions’ allow us to plan, think ahead and pay attention. Problems in these areas can have a big impact on how we learn and manage our day to day lives. Learning disabilities in these areas can make it challenging for some students to organize their time, finish homework, and remembering when tests and assignments are coming up. Some students may often lose schoolwork, books, clothes or lunch bags. Some people see ADHD (Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder) as a learning disability because ADHD affects these ‘executive’ functions). However, most professionals or school boards do not think ADHD is a learning disability

A word about social skills…

Learning to work and play with others is an important skill. Children and youth who have trouble picking up on social cues, facial expressions and body language can have difficulty making friends and getting along with others at school. Such social difficulties are not learning disabilities. But children who experience them can benefit when education programs include social skill building activities.

What causes learning disabilities?

Most learning disabilities are present at birth, and result from the way a child’s brain develops. It is also possible for a child to develop a learning disability after a brain injury or other problems that effect the brain (like epilepsy). Learning disabilities are not caused by poor parenting, poverty or a child’s lack of motivation (although these things can definitely affect learning). There is no ‘cure’ for a learning disability, and children don’t outgrow them. But with support, children and youth can learn to manage LDs effectively in their daily lives.

How common are learning disabilities?

According to Statistics Canada, (2006), about 3.2% of Canadian children have a learning disability. That’s about 1 out of every 31 children in Canada, about 1 student in every classroom.

Impact of learning disabilities

Learning disabilities can have major impacts on a child’s life, because so much of a child’s life at home, school and with peers depends on learning. But the greatest impact is at school. Children and youth with difficulties reading and writing will need support in subjects like history, geography, science and language arts.

A learning disability may be even more obvious when teachers use methods that make learning even more challenging for the child or teen. For example:

- Teaching by talking or lecturing, without using visual aids (like diagrams or written text) can make learning difficult for students who are ‘visual’ learners.
- Classrooms where there is an emphasis on writing will be difficult for students with writing disabilities.

Technology that emphasizes the sharing of ideas has made a big difference for some students. Software is now available to:

- ‘Read’ text aloud. This allows the student to focus on the meaning of the information, rather than struggling with recognizing or sounding out words.

- Convert speech into writing. Again, this allows students to focus on what they want to say, rather than struggling with how to spell it and put it into a sentence that makes sense to others.

The good news

The right environment can really improve the potential for learning in children and youth with LDs. Some people believe that the main problem is our education system itself, which mostly teaches in one way, making it difficult for children and youth who learn in different ways. The impact of a learning disability also depends on the child, and how much the mode of learning they struggle with is used in their life.

Children and youth with learning disabilities involving reading or writing may do very well in other subjects, like math, physics, sports, music, dance, design or construction. On the other hand, children and youth with disabilities that affect math skills may do very well in subjects involving reading and writing.

Conditions that often occur along with learning disabilities (Comorbid Conditions)

Children and youth with learning disabilities may also have problems with:

- Attention. Many children with learning disabilities also have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), making it difficult for them to focus and pay attention.
- Mood, anxiety and behaviour. Learning disabilities can make school and learning more challenging. They may also affect social relationships. These stresses can affect moods, and cause anxiety and behaviour problems. It’s a 2 way street, though. Problems with mood, anxiety and behaviour also affect learning.
- Listening and speaking (which may be part of a Communication Disorder).
- Coordinating large or small muscle movements. This can mean difficulties walking, running, throwing a ball or playing sports. It can also mean trouble with hand writing, drawing or other hand movements.

How do I know if my child has a learning disability?

Students with learning disabilities may:

- Get poorer grades in just one subject area. For example, a student who does well in all subjects, but is struggling with math.
- Have to work very hard (harder than most other students) to get reasonable grades. For example, a student who usually gets Bs, but must work extra hard for a passing grade in Language Arts.

What should I do if I think my child has a learning disability?

- Check hearing and vision. Problems hearing or seeing can have a big impact on learning. Start by taking your child to see your family doctor or paediatrician. You can also take your child to an optometrist for vision testing.
- Speak with the school about your concerns. School boards have psychologists who can assess your child (psycho-educational assessment). After these detailed tests about how your child learns, a psychologist can then decide if your child has a learning disability or not. Wait lists for this testing can be long. Some parents choose to pay to have a psychologist in private practice assess their child.
- If your child speaks 2 languages (for example, French and English), try to find a psychologist who speaks both of these languages. It may be that your child is having trouble learning in a 2nd language.

Parenting a child or teen with a learning disability

- Adjust your expectations to what your child or teen can do. Children and youth do well if they can. If they can’t do well, it may be the learning disability that makes it hard for them to meet their parents’

expectations.
- Be as patient as you can. The LD is a problem with the brain's 'wiring'-it's not your child's fault.
- Look for and encourage your child's strengths, interests, and abilities. Help your child or teen find chances to do well at things. You can also use your child's interests to help with school. For example, if your child has trouble reading, but loves hockey, books about hockey may help her work on her reading skills.
- Focus on the effort and the process, instead of grades or the 'outcome'. "Wow, you have put so much work into this project!" "You have chosen some beautiful colours for this" "I'm proud of how hard you're working" "Think of how far you've come with this!" "I know this hasn't been easy, but you've done a great job at sticking with it!"
- Lighten the load. Some high school students may do better in school with a lighter course load. It's okay to take a little longer to finish high school-students take an extra year for many reasons. The diploma at the end is what's important, not the time it took.
- Don't let the learning disability 'define' your child or teen. Remind yourself (and your child!) of your child's strengths and interests.
- Share your wisdom. If you have a learning disability, please share your experience and coping strategies. Nobody will understand what your child is experiencing better than someone who's walked the same road.
- Help youth take advantage of learning supports. Colleges and universities have many supports for students with learning disabilities. When students start at college or university, they need to bring a report that confirms the LD diagnosis and outlines the results of their psycho-educational assessment (done in the last 2 years). Students can then get the accomodations they need for classes, assignments or tests.

How to help a child or teen with a learning disability

There are many ways to make learning easier for children and youth with LD:

- Break down large tasks into smaller ones.
- Teach specific skills. Children and youth may need help learning to organize their time, use an agenda or follow a schedule.
- Accommodate the student. Change the learning environment to making learning easier by:
    - Developing an Individual Education Plan (IEP) that is based on the student's needs and strengths. Ask the teacher if an IEP is possible.
    - Offering a resource period in high school, so students have more time to complete school work.
    - Special seating assignments.
    - Creating assignments that match with the student's abilities.
    - Modifying tests (for example, oral tests instead of written ones).

Examples of accomodations for students with a writing disability:

- Give written handouts to students with writing disabilities
- Allow students to use keyboards for notes and assignments
- Give extra time for tests and assignments

Accomodations for students with spelling disabilities:

- Allowing spell checkers, electronic dictionaries

Teach 'compensatory' strategies. Teach students to use their learning strengths to 'go around' their learning disability.

For example:

- Allow students who learn better by listening (auditory learners) to talk aloud to themselves to organize their thoughts.
- Use drawings, diagrams or demonstrations to explain things to students who learn better by seeing (visual learners).
- Teach students to speak up for themselves (self-advocacy skills). Teach students how to explain their unique learning needs to others and to ask for appropriate supports and accomodations.

Working with your child’s school

If your child has already had psychoeducational testing, then start by making sure that there is a copy of your child’s psycho- educational testing in your child’s school records. Ontario School Records (OSR) are kept in the school’s main office. At the beginning of each school year, remind teachers to review this report.

1) Speak with teachers about your child or teen’s learning disability. Work together to come to a common understanding of:

- The exact problem (diagnosis)
- How much help and support is needed
- Where your child or teen will receive help

2) IPRC (Identification Placement Review Committee)

Once your child has been diagnosed with a learning disability, the school will usually set up an IPRC meeting. Parents can ask for one as well. Once you make the request, the school has 30 days to respond.

People that attend an IPRC will include:

- The school principal or vice-principal
- Your child’s teacher
- A resource teacher
- Parents

During the IPRC meeting, members will review the test results and any other reports, discuss concerns and decide if your child or teen should be formally identified as having exceptional learning needs. The psychologist who assessed your child and made the diagnosis can guide and advise you through this process. Once the IPRC agrees that your child or teen has exceptional learning needs, this group will meet once a year.

During these meetings, the IPRC will review the student’s progress, and whether or not the learning supports are helping. Be sure to attend each of these meetings. These yearly meetings give you a chance to speak up for your child. They will help you understand how school staff decides which learning supports your child will receive, and if learning supports will continue.

3. IEP (Individual Education Plan)

Teachers develop these plans for students who need extra support or accommodations in class.

IEPs are developed for:

- All students who have been formally identified by the IPRC
- Students having trouble in school, but have not been diagnosed with a learning disability.

IEPs are only binding if they were developed after an IPRC. This means that IEPs developed without the IPRC process can change or be cancelled if the school’s budget changes. IEPs can include accomodations (as discussed earlier) or changes to the curriculum content if students can’t succeed at their current grade level.

For example, in the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (OCDSB) in Ontario, Canada, the main levels of school support are:

- Regular Class with modified program: the student stays in the regular classroom, but the teacher makes changes to the school expectations for that student.
- Regular Class with Resource Assistance (Special Education Resource Support Program): the student can leave the regular classroom to go to a resource room where a resource teacher can give extra help.
- Special Education Learning Centre (SELC): the student spends all or part of the day in a small special education class
- System-based programs: the student spends time in a small special education class, often at a different school.

Should my child repeat a grade, or be promoted to the next grade with a modified program?

In most cases learning the same material a second time (even with supports) doesn't help all that much. The learning disability will still be there. Research suggests that repeating a grade does not really benefit students, and has a negative impact on self esteem. It's better to provide effective accommodations that allow students to remain with their peers.

Lynn's Story, Part 2

Lynn's parents express their concerns to the teacher, who agrees with them. Lynn is placed on a school waitlist, and is eventually seen by the school psychologist for a psycho-educational assessment. The assessment shows that Lynn has a learning disability in math. Lynn's school arrange for an IPRC, and Lynn's teacher develops an IEP for her. With a little extra tutoring, the use of a calculator and more time for tests, Lynn is doing much better in math. The school psychologist also offers some good suggestions for coping with the anxiety that sometimes comes with math homework and tests. Evenings at home are much calmer now, since the fights over math homework have stopped.

Disclaimer

Information in this fact sheet may or may not apply to your child. Your health care provider is the best source of information about your child's health.

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