

Reference document

Learning disabilities in children



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Introduction

Sources of both pride and challenges, education and learning are part of childhood and family life.

Despite having normal intelligence and receiving proper education, some children may need to contend with obstacles to learning. These obstacles may come up in mathematics, reading or writing, or when using work tools, managing tasks or needing to remain focused.

Although challenges are a normal part of any learning process, what happens when they become a learning disability? What do children with learning disabilities experience on a daily basis? How do these situations affect their parents and family? What resources are available to meet children's and families' needs?

Myths and facts

Contrary to popular belief, a learning disability is not:

- Ascribable to economic disadvantage, or cultural or linguistic differences
- A disease, motor retardation or a muscle abnormality
- The result of insufficient stimulation or inadequate education
- An intellectual disability, an autism spectrum disorder, or a hearing or vision problem
- A behavioural disorder or clumsiness
- A lack of motivation, willpower or effort

These misconceptions are false and can keep parents and families from understanding their child's situation and seeking out the appropriate resources.

In reality, children with a learning disability:

- Often have normal intelligence and the potential for great success by developing appropriate adaptive strategies and skills
- May see these challenges possibly affect their friendships, studies, work, self-esteem, feeling of personal competence and daily life
- Experience various manifestations of it throughout their life, depending on what their environment requires of them, their personal strengths and their needs
- Are dealing with something that may be genetic, have a neurobiological cause or be related to brain damage, and may also be concomitant with other disorders such as ADHD or a sensory deficit

Definition

According to the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, the term learning disability refers to a number of disorders which may affect the acquisition, organization, retention, comprehension or processing of verbal or non-verbal information. These disorders affect learning in children who otherwise demonstrate at least average abilities essential for thinking and/or reasoning. Therefore, learning disabilities are distinct from global intellectual deficiency.

The categories of learning disability

Categories	Area of difficulty	Symptoms include trouble with...	Examples
Dyslexia	Processing language	Reading, writing and spelling	Letters and words may be written or pronounced incorrectly
Dyscalculia	Math skills and concepts	Computation, remembering math facts, concepts of time, money, grasping math concepts, etc.	Difficulty learning to count by 2s, 3s, 4s
Dysgraphia	Written expression	Handwriting, spelling, expressing ideas on paper	Illegible handwriting, difficulty organizing ideas, getting thoughts on paper
Dyspraxia	Fine motor skills	Coordination, manual dexterity	Trouble with scissors, buttons, drawing, writing
Auditory Processing Disorder	Interpreting auditory information	Language development, reading	Difficulty anticipating how a speaker will end a sentence
Visual Processing Disorder	Interpreting visual information	Reading, writing and counting	Difficulty distinguishing letters like <i>h</i> and <i>n</i>

* Inspired by the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, 2016

Recognizing a learning disability

A child may experience learning difficulties that are temporary and caused by many factors and that can include:

- Taking much longer to complete reading and writing tasks than other children their age
- Seeing their school performance significantly affected when they are tired
- Being unable to sit still long enough to do school work, fiddling with objects, getting up for no reason, gesturing, being bothered by the slightest thing, misplacing their notebooks, forgetting school work due dates or class times (also signs of an attention deficit disorder with or without hyperactivity)
- Being nervous when reading or writing, and trying to avoid the activity or refusing to do it in class
- Having trouble remembering sequences, having trouble looking up words in a dictionary, being sometimes unsure of the order of seasons or months
- Getting lost when dealing with multi-step logical reasoning
- Quickly forgetting concepts learned
- Demonstrating much weaker writing abilities than their oral contributions in class would suggest
- Obtaining results that are disappointing given their efforts
- Having writing that is difficult to read
- Writing disjointed compositions
- Having trouble summarizing a story or chain of events
- Often misunderstanding instructions for assignments
- Making errors that are surprising and uncommon for a student of their age and grade
- Writing the same word several different ways within the same work

- Forgetting words when writing sentences
- Forgetting to write certain syllables or letters in long words
- Mixing up *b* and *p*, and *g* and *q*
- Receiving highly variable grades
- Running out of time to complete examinations, especially when they involve a lot of reading
- Forgetting to answer some parts of multi-part questions
- Performing very poorly on multiple-choice examinations

If such difficulties occur frequently, the child may have a learning disability. In such a case, it would be appropriate to consult professional resources to confirm a diagnosis. Parents should avoid making their own diagnosis and should not discuss learning disabilities with their child before a diagnosis is confirmed.

Evaluation and support

For optimal support, it is essential that the child be screened early and undergo the appropriate evaluations by professionals.

For the process to be successful, interventions will need to be set up both at home and at school or daycare. These interventions should take into account the child's characteristics and the results of the professional evaluation to include the following measures: teaching adapted to the specific deficits, education about compensatory strategies, and the implementation of support measures. At school, an intervention plan may be drawn up with all of the child's attendants and the parents to better manage support.

Professionals

The following resources can be consulted when evaluating or providing support for learning disabilities:

Institut des troubles d'apprentissage: www.institutta.com

Canadian Dyslexia Centre: www.dyslexiacentre.ca

Canadian Dyslexia Association: www.dyslexiaassociation.ca

Regroupement Langage Québec: www.dysphasie.qc.ca

Learning Disabilities Association of Canada: www.ldac-acta.ca

Professional educational resources:

- Learning Disabilities Associations
- Special Education Associations
- Provincial Learning Assistance Teachers' Associations
- Ordre des orthophonistes et audiologistes du Québec: www.ooaq.qc.ca
- Association des Orthopédagogues du Québec: www.ladoq.ca
- Ordre des psychologues du Québec: www.ordrepsy.qc.ca

Ordre des ergothérapeutes du Québec: www.oeg.org

Neuropsychological evaluation and support clinics in your region

Your employer's Employee Assistance Program

If urgent, the case may also be referred to a qualified professional such as a pediatrician or a general practitioner.

Conclusion

A learning disability can have a major impact on a child's feeling of competence, self-esteem and success. Their parents and family also feel this impact.

That is why it is crucial to have all the information on the child's situation, to know what resources are available and to implement the necessary support measures as soon as difficulties begin manifesting. Strong collaboration between the family and everyone involved with the child will help them achieve success.

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