

Learning Disabilities

NICHCY Disability Fact Sheet #7
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Sara's Story

When Sara was in the first grade, her teacher started teaching the students how to read. Sara's parents were really surprised when Sara had a lot of trouble. She was bright and eager, so they thought that reading would come easily to her. It didn't. She couldn't match the letters to their sounds or combine the letters to create words.

Sara's problems continued into second grade. She still wasn't reading, and she was having trouble with writing, too. The school asked Sara's mom for permission to evaluate Sara to find out what was causing her problems. Sara's mom gave permission for the evaluation.

The school conducted an evaluation and learned that Sara has a learning disability. She started getting special help in school right away.

Sara's still getting that special help. She works with a reading specialist and a resource room teacher every day. She's in the fourth grade now, and she's made real progress! She is working hard to bring her reading and writing up to grade level. With help from the

school, she'll keep learning and doing well.

What are Learning Disabilities?

Learning disability is a general term that describes specific kinds of learning problems. A learning disability can cause a person to have trouble learning and using certain skills. The skills most often affected are: reading, writing, listening, speaking, reasoning, and doing math.

"Learning disabilities" is not the only term used to describe these difficulties. Others include:

- *dyslexia*—which refers to difficulties in reading;
- *dysgraphia*—which refers to difficulties in writing; and
- *dyscalcula*—which refers to difficulties in math.

All of these are considered learning disabilities.

Learning disabilities (LD) vary from person to person. One person with LD may not have the same kind of learning problems as another person with LD. Sara, in our example above, has trouble with reading and writing. Another person with LD may have problems with understanding math. Still another person may have trouble in both of these areas, as well as with understanding what people are saying.

Researchers think that learning disabilities are caused by differences in how a person's brain works and how it processes information. Children with learning disabilities are not "dumb" or "lazy." In fact, they usually have average or above average intelligence. Their brains just process information differently.



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There is no “cure” for learning disabilities. They are life-long. However, children with LD can be high achievers and can be taught ways to get around the learning disability. With the right help, children with LD can and do learn successfully.

How Common are Learning Disabilities?

Very common! As many as 1 out of every 5 people in the United States has a learning disability. Almost 1 million children (ages 6 through 21) have some form of a learning disability and receive special education in school. In fact, one-third of all children who receive special education have a learning disability (Twenty-Ninth Annual Report to Congress, U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

What Are the Signs of a Learning Disability?

While there is no one “sign” that a person has a learning disability, there are certain clues. We’ve listed a few below. Most relate to elementary school tasks, because learning disabilities tend to be identified in elementary school. This is because school focuses on the very things that may be difficult for the child—reading, writing, math, listening, speaking, reasoning. A child probably won’t show all of these signs, or even most of them. However, if a child shows a number of these problems, then parents and the teacher should consider the possibility that the child has a learning disability.



When a child has a learning disability, he or she:

- may have trouble learning the alphabet, rhyming words, or connecting letters to their sounds;
- may make many mistakes when reading aloud, and repeat and pause often;
- may not understand what he or she reads;
- may have real trouble with spelling;
- may have very messy handwriting or hold a pencil awkwardly;
- may struggle to express ideas in writing;
- may learn language late and have a limited vocabulary;
- may have trouble remembering the sounds that letters make or hearing slight differences between words;
- may have trouble understanding jokes, comic strips, and sarcasm;
- may have trouble following directions;
- may mispronounce words or use a wrong word that sounds similar;

- may have trouble organizing what he or she wants to say or not be able to think of the word he or she needs for writing or conversation;
- may not follow the social rules of conversation, such as taking turns, and may stand too close to the listener;
- may confuse math symbols and misread numbers;
- may not be able to retell a story in order (what happened first, second, third); or
- may not know where to begin a task or how to go on from there.

If a child has unexpected problems learning to read, write, listen, speak, or do math, then teachers and parents may want to investigate more. The same is true if the child is struggling to do any one of these skills. The child may need to be evaluated to see if he or she has a learning disability.

About the Evaluation Process

If you are concerned that your child may have a learning disability, contact his or her school and request that the school conduct an individualized evaluation under IDEA (the nation’s special education law) to see if, in fact, a learning disability is causing your child difficulties in school. Visit NICHCY’s website and read more about the evaluation process, beginning at: <http://www.nichcy.org/schoolage/evaluation/>

What if the School System Declines to Evaluate Your Child?

If the school doesn't think that your child's learning problems are caused by a learning disability, it may decline to evaluate your child. If this happens, there are specific actions you can take. These include:

- *Contact your state's Parent Training and Information Center (PTI) for assistance.* The PTI can offer you guidance and support in what to do next. Find your PTI by visiting: <http://www.taalliance.org/ptidirectory/pclist.asp>
- *Consider having your child evaluated by an independent evaluator.* You may have to pay for this evaluation, or you can ask that the school pay for it. To learn more about independent evaluations, visit NICHCY at: <http://www.nichcy.org/schoolage/parental-rights/iee>
- *Ask for mediation, or use one of IDEA's other dispute resolution options.* Parents have the right to disagree with the school's decision not to evaluate their child and be heard. To find out more about dispute resolution options, visit NICHCY at: <http://www.nichcy.org/schoolage/disputes/overview/>

IDEA's Definition of LD

Not surprisingly, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) includes a definition of "specific learning disability." We've presented this in the box below. IDEA also lists evaluation procedures that must be used at a minimum to identify and document that a child has a specific learning disability. These will now be discussed in brief.

Additional Evaluation Procedures for LD

Now for the confusing part! The ways in which children are identified as having a learning disability have changed over the years. Until recently, the most common approach was to use a "severe discrepancy" formula. This referred to the gap, or discrepancy, between the child's intelligence or aptitude and his or her actual performance.

However, in the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, how LD is determined has been expanded. IDEA now requires that states adopt criteria that:

- ***must not require*** the use of a severe discrepancy between intellectual ability and achievement in determining whether a child has a specific learning disability;



IDEA's Definition of "Specific Learning Disability"

The nation's special education law specifically defines the term "specific learning disability," as follows:

(10) *Specific learning disability* —(i) *General.* Specific learning disability means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia.

(ii) *Disorders not included.* Specific learning disability does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.

34 CFR §300.8(c)(10)

- **must permit** local educational agencies (LEAs) to use a process based on the child's response to scientific, research-based intervention; and
- **may permit** the use of other alternative research-based procedures for determining whether a child has a specific learning disability.

Basically, what this means is that, instead of using a severe discrepancy approach to determining LD, school systems may provide the student with a research-based intervention and keep close track of the student's performance. Analyzing the student's response to that intervention (RTI) may then be considered by school districts in the process of identifying that a child has a learning disability.

There are also other aspects required when evaluating children for LD. These include observing the student in his or her learning environment (including the regular education setting) to document academic performance and behavior in the areas of difficulty.

This entire fact sheet could be devoted to what IDEA requires when children are evaluated for a learning disability. Instead, let us refer you to a training module on the subject. It's quite detailed, but if you would like to know those details, read through Module 11 of NICHCY's *Building the Legacy* curriculum on IDEA 2004. It's available online, at: <http://www.nichcy.org/laws/idea/legacy/module11/>

Moving on, let us suppose that the student *has* been diagnosed with a specific learning disability. What next?

What About School?

Once a child is evaluated and found eligible for special education and related services, school staff and parents meet and develop what is known as an **Individualized Education Program**, or IEP. This document is very important in the educational life of a child with learning disabilities. It describes the child's needs and the services that the public school system will provide free of charge to address those needs. Learn more about the IEP, what it includes, and how it is developed, at: <http://www.nichcy.org/schoolage/iep/>

Supports or changes in the classroom (called *accommodations*) help most students with LD. Common accommodations are listed in the "Tips for Teachers" box on the next page. Accessible instructional materials (AIM) are among the most helpful to students whose LD affects their ability to read and process printed language. Thanks to IDEA 2004, there are numerous places to turn now for AIMs. We've listed one central source in "Resources Especially for Teachers" on the next page.

Assistive technology can also help many students work around their learning disabilities. Assistive technology can range from "low-tech" equipment such as tape recorders to "high-tech" tools such as reading machines (which read

books aloud) and voice recognition systems (which allow the student to "write" by talking to the computer). To learn more about AT for students who have learning disabilities, visit LD Online's Technology section, at: <http://www.ldonline.org/indepth/technology>

What About Home?

A child with learning disabilities may need help at home as well as in school. Some suggestions are given in under "Tips for Parents" (see page 6) where you'll find other relevant items listed, too.

Conclusion

Learning disabilities clearly affect some of the key skills in life—reading, writing, doing math. Because many people have learning disabilities, there is a great deal of expertise and support available. Take advantage of the many organizations focused on LD. Their materials and their work are intended solely to help families, students, educators, and others understand LD and address it in ways that have long-lasting impact.

Tips for Teachers

Learn as much as you can about the different types of LD. The resources and organizations listed below can help you identify specific techniques and strategies to support the student educationally.

Seize the opportunity to make an enormous difference in this student's life! Find out and emphasize what the student's strengths and interests are. Give the student positive feedback and lots of opportunities for practice.

Provide instruction and accommodations to address the student's special needs. Examples:

- breaking tasks into smaller steps, and giving directions verbally and in writing;
- giving the student more time to finish schoolwork or take tests;
- letting the student with reading problems use instructional materials that are accessible to those with print disabilities;

- letting the student with listening difficulties borrow notes from a classmate or use a tape recorder; and
- letting the student with writing difficulties use a computer with specialized software that spell checks, grammar checks, or recognizes speech.

Learn about the different testing modifications that can really help a student with LD show what he or she has learned.

Teach organizational skills, study skills, and learning strategies. These help all students but are particularly helpful to those with LD.

Work with the student's parents to create an IEP tailored to meet the student's needs.

Establish a positive working relationship with the student's parents. Through regular communication, exchange information about the student's progress at school.



Resources Especially for Teachers

LD Online | For Educators

<http://www.ldonline.org/educators>

LD Online | Teaching and Instruction

<http://www.ldonline.org/indepth/teaching>

National Center for Learning Disabilities | Especially for Teachers

<http://www.ncld.org/at-school/especially-for-teachers>

TeachingLD | A service of the Division for Learning Disabilities (DLD) of the Council for Exceptional Children
<http://www.dldcec.org/>

Learning Disabilities Association of America | For Teachers

<http://www.ldanatl.org/aboutld/teachers/index.asp>

National Center for Accessible Instructional Materials | Find AIM in your state!

<http://aim.cast.org/>

Reading Rockets | For Teachers

<http://www.readingrockets.org/audience/teachers>

Tips for Parents

Learn about LD. The more you know, the more you can help yourself and your child.

Praise your child when he or she does well. Children with LD are often very good at a variety of things. Find out what your child really enjoys doing, such as dancing, playing soccer, or working with computers. Give your child plenty of opportunities to pursue his or her strengths and talents.

Find out the ways your child learns best. Does he or she learn by hands-on practice, looking, or listening? Help your child learn through his or her areas of strength.

Let your son or daughter help with household chores. These can build self-confidence and concrete skills. Keep instructions simple, break down tasks into smaller steps, and reward your child's efforts with praise.

Make homework a priority. Read more about how to help your child be a success at homework in the resources listed below.

Pay attention to your child's mental health (and your own!). Be open to counseling, which can help your child deal with frustration, feel better about himself or herself, and learn more about social skills.

Talk to other parents whose children have LD. Parents can share practical advice and emotional support. You can identify parent groups

in your area via NICHCY's State Resource Sheets. Go to the section entitled "Disability-Specific Agencies" and scroll down until you reach "learning disabilities."

Meet with school personnel and help develop an IEP to address your child's needs. Plan what accommodations your child needs, and don't forget to talk about AIM or assistive technology!

Establish a positive working relationship with your child's teacher. Through regular communication, exchange information about your child's progress at home and at school.



Resources Especially for Parents

LD Online | For Parents

<http://www.ldonline.org/parents>

LD Online | Parenting and Family

<http://www.ldonline.org/indepth/parenting>

National Center for Learning Disabilities | In the Home

<http://www.nclld.org/in-the-home>

Learning Disabilities Association of America | For Parents

<http://www.ldanatl.org/aboutld/parents/index.asp>

Reading Rockets | For Parents

<http://www.readingrockets.org/audience/parents>



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