

Learning Difficulties Learning Problems/Learning Disabilities

What are learning problems?

The term “learning problem” generally refers to difficulty mastering basic academic skills such as reading, spelling, writing, and arithmetic.

Is there a difference between learning problems and learning disabilities?

Learning problems are learning difficulties that affect a child or adolescent’s functioning but are not severe enough to meet criteria for the diagnosis of a learning disability.

Symptoms of learning problems

Early Childhood

- Delays in recognizing letters, numbers, shapes and colors
- Development in areas such as game playing, dressing, toileting can be within the normal range

Middle Childhood

- Underachievement in school compared to expected abilities identified with standardized testing
- Inconsistent academic performance from term to term
- Poor performance in some school subjects
- Mild to moderate lack of interest in school

Adolescence

- Weak reading skills
- Homework problems
- Organizational difficulties
- Failure in certain school subjects
- Poor written and verbal skills – not poor enough to have an academic disorder

What can I do?

Early intervention is important. If you are concerned that your child displays any of the above symptoms talk to your pediatrician. It may be necessary for your child to have testing. Initial testing usually takes place in the public school setting.

What is a learning disability?

A learning disability is a delay in key school skills, such as reading, math or writing. This delay is present even if the child is being taught what they need and the child is working hard enough.

Most children with learning disabilities have average or above average intelligence. Usually, there is a problem in just one skill area where the child needs extra help. Every child with a learning disability is unique with their own set of strengths and weaknesses.

With support and help, children with learning disabilities can learn how to adapt to their challenges and achieve success.

While all children may have some of the following symptoms at some time in their development, children with learning disabilities may need special help in certain areas.

Symptoms you may see in your child:

- Problems with letters, numbers or sounds.
- Poor reading and/or writing skills.
- Problems sorting things into like groups.
- Eye-hand coordination problems (such as, problems catching a ball; slower at video/computer games).
- General clumsiness.
- Sensory problems (examples?).
- Poor memory.
- Short attention span.
- Easily distracted.
- Problems following directions.
- Problems staying organized (such as, homework, keeping track of personal items).

Other ways a learning disability may affect your child:

- Problems sounding out words.
- Reverses letters.
- Does not place letters in correct order.
- Problems understanding words or concepts.
- Says one thing, but means another.
- Started to talk later than other children or speech not clear.
- Problems telling time and/or knowing right from left.
- Problems listening and/or remembering.
- Distracts easily, restless, impulsive.
- Problems finishing work.
- Performs differently from day to day.
- Doesn't adjust well to change.

How common are learning disabilities?

About 5% of students in public schools in the United States have some type of learning disorder.

How are learning disabilities treated?

Since a child with a learning disability is struggling with certain school skills, all good treatments center on *extra instruction* in those areas. Ideally, this extra help should start as soon as the problem is found, probably in kindergarten or 1st grade. Your child's school may have a program to help your child or you may need to seek outside help at a learning center.

How can I help my child?

General Suggestions:

- Make sure the school has a special plan in place for your child. Your child should have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or a 504 plan.
- Have your child take part in activities they are good at and enjoy (such as, scouts, dance, art, music, gymnastics, sports – for classes check with your park or recreation department).
- Recognize your child's strengths and celebrate successes.
- Help your child develop social skills (such as, waiting your turn to speak). Make a game of it, role play.
- Help your child develop organizational skills. Start early with small tasks like sorting the silverware or setting out clothes for the next day. This will make larger tasks seem easier to manage.
- Help your child make some decisions by giving them choices (such as, what to wear, what to have for dinner, help plan a family activity).
- Have regular times for meals, homework, and bedtime and stick to it as much as possible.
- Help your child plan their weekly schedule. Start with a day at a time, then several days and work up to planning the week. Help your child make choices and set goals.
- Keep in close contact with your child's school. Volunteer if you are able. Attend school events to support your child.
- Help your child develop the same behaviors you expect from other children in the family.
- Help your child understand that the learning disability is just a small part of who they are.

General Guidelines for Any Child with Learning Difficulties

General Homework Tips:

- Talk to your child's teacher about their work. Ask what you can do at home to help your child.
- Talk to your child's teacher so you will know how much homework will be given and how often. Decide together if the amount and type of homework is all right for your child. Ask what you can do at home to reinforce learning.

- Learning takes place in a calm environment. Be patient with your child.
- Make sure your child has a quiet, well-lit place to do homework.
- Make sure your child has the supplies they need (such as, paper, pencils, and dictionary).
- Establish a set time each day for doing homework.
- Be positive about homework.
- Encourage your child to use a daily assignment book.
- Follow your child's progress. Check assignments daily.
- Tell your child that you think school is important.
- Set a good example for your child during homework time. If he/she is reading, you read. If he/she is doing math, balance your checkbook.
- When your child asks for help, help them figure out the answer. Be clear with your child that the homework belongs to them.
- Have your child start any "hard homework" first – before they get tired.
- Watch your child for signs of frustration – schedule short break times.
- Reward progress in homework – celebrate your child's successes.
- Be sure to give specific praise to your child. You may use one of the following phrases that fits your child's efforts:
 - "You are a hard worker."
 - "This is hard, but you are really trying."
 - "Good for you; that made sense."
 - "You figured that out all by yourself."
 - "You are really on your way."

Reading homework tip:

- Choose a quiet place for reading.
- As your child reads, point out spelling and sound patterns, such as *cat*, *pat*, *hat*
- When your child gets stuck on a word:
 - *Wait* – allow your child some time to figure it out. If they are still having trouble with the word help them sound it out.
- When your child makes a mistake and continues reading:
 - *Wait* – allow your child to discover the error, let them know "this is what good readers do"
 - *If they go back and fix it up*, praise them by saying, "good for you, that made sense"

If they keep going, wait until the end of the page or paragraph and then say “something didn’t make sense there, did it. Why don’t you try that again.” This allows your child to problem solve.

If they cannot figure out a word, tell them the word. Maybe it is a word they do not know. Or coach them by having them use part of the word they know to figure it out.

- After problem solving through a word, always go back and re-read to make sure it makes sense, and to help your child think about the meaning of the story.
- What your child reads out loud to you could be at a level below what they read in class. This reinforces their reading skills. If the reading material seems too difficult, talk to your child’s teacher.
- When your child is reading, pause occasionally and ask questions about what is happening in the story.
- Before getting to the end of the story, ask your child what they think will happen next.
- Ask your child to tell you the story in their own words.
- Read for fun. You and your child can take turns reading aloud every night if possible.

Math homework tips

- Ask the teacher what math skills will be taught during the semester and what you can do to help your child.
- Begin each math homework time by asking your child what they are supposed to do. If your child can explain the homework assignment, you will have an idea if they understand it.
- It is OK to say you do not understand a math problem. Use your child’s teacher as a resource for additional help.
- Ask the teacher if your child can use a calculator to check the finished work.
- Show your child how math is used in every day life, such as, counting out forks, pouring from a gallon of milk, telling the time a favorite TV program begins.
- When driving in the car, talk about how numbers tell us how fast we are driving, how far we have gone, how long it will take to get home.
- If your child needs more help, ask the math teacher if your child can get extra help outside of class.
- If your child is still having problems, your school principal may be able to find help.

Where else can I get information about learning difficulties?

Books

Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning about Print
By Marilyn Jager Adams, PhD

Ending the Homework Hassle
By John Rosemound

Family Math
By Jean Kerr Stenmark, Virginia Thompson & Ruth Cossey

Games for Reading: Playful Ways to Help Your Child Read
By Peggy Kaye

Homework without Tears: A Parent's Guide for Motivating Children to Do Homework
By Lee Canter

How to Reach & Teach Children and Teens with Dyslexia
By Cynthia M. Stowe, M. Ed.

Keeping a Head in School
By Melvin D. Levine

Multicultural Math: Hands-On Math Activities from Around the World
By Claudia Zaslavsky

Overcoming Dyslexia
By Sally Shaywitz, M.D.

Parenting a Struggling Reader
By Susan L. Hall & Louisa Cook Moats

Read to Me: Raising Kids Who Love to Read
By Bernice E. Cullinan

Smart Kids with School Problems: Things to Know and Ways to Help
By Priscilla L. Vail

Straight Talk About Reading
By Susan L. Hall & Louisa Cook Moats

Teach Your Child Math
By Arthur Benjamin & Michael Brant Shermer

Your Struggling Child
By Robert F. Newby, PhD.

Web Sites

Council for Exceptional Children (CEC)
Division for Learning Disabilities (DLD)
1920 Association Drive
Reston, VA 22091
Phone: 703-620-3660
<http://www.cec.sped.org>

Council for Learning Disabilities (CLD)
P.O. Box 40303
Overland Park, KS 66204
<http://www.cldinternational.org>

IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act)
U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs
<http://www.ed.gov>

International Dyslexia Association (IDA)
8600 LaSalle Road
Chester Building, Suite 382
Baltimore, MD 21286
Phone: 410-296-0232
<http://www.interdys.org>

Learning Disabilities Association of America
4156 Library Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15234
Phone: 412-341-1515
<http://www.ldanatl.org>

LD Online
<http://www.ldonline.org>

LD Online is a service of the Learning Project at WETA, Washington, DC, in association with the Coordinated Campaign for Learning Disabilities

Legal Rights
<http://wrightslaw.com>

National Center for Learning Disabilities
381 Park Avenue South, Suite 1401
New York, NY 10016
Phone: 888-5757373
<http://www.nclld.org>

National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (NICHCY)
P.O. Box 1492
Washington, D.C.
Phone: 800-695-0285
<http://www.nichcy.org>

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development
Teaching Children to Read
<http://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/nrp/smallbook.cfm>

Schwab Foundation for Learning
1650 South Amphlett Boulevard, Suite 300
San Mateo, CA 94402
Phone: 800-230-0988
<http://www.schwablearning.org>

US Department of Education
Helping Your Child Learn Math
<http://www.ed.gov/parents/academic/help/math/index.html>

U.S. Justice Department's Civil Rights Division
<http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/edo>

[For further information about eligibility and services, families can consult the school's special education coordinator, the local school district, the state Department of Education's Special Education Division, or the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs.]

Information adapted from:

American Academy of Pediatrics/Bright Futures
<http://www.brightfutures.aap.org>

Learning Disabilities Association of America
<http://www.ldanatl.org>

Schwab Foundation for Learning
<http://www.schwablearning.org>

Glossary

“Learning Disabilities” covers a number of specific problems with learning and retaining information. Some of these are listed below.

Dyslexia: a language and reading disability

Dyscalculia: problems with arithmetic and math concepts

Dysgraphia: a writing disorder resulting in illegibility

Dyspraxia: problems with motor coordination

Central Auditory Processing Disorder: difficulty processing and remembering language-related tasks

Non-verbal Learning Disorders: trouble with nonverbal cues, e.g., body language, poor communication, clumsy

Visual Perception/Visual Motor Deficit: reverses letters; cannot copy letters; eyes hurt and itch; loses place; problems cutting with scissors

Language Disorders (Aphasia/Dysphasia): trouble understanding spoken language; poor reading comprehension