Understanding learning disabilities

If you or a child in your life is having difficulty concentrating on and taking in new information, it's important to identify the exact problem as early as possible.



Children, and adults, who are not keeping up with their peers can develop lowered self-esteem, which compounds any problem. With early intervention, you and other important people in your child's life can understand the nature of the disability or impairment and can find strategies to help the situation.

People with learning disabilities are often very bright. Early developmental difficulties will not necessarily effect the child's ultimate academic success, provided that the child is given the right tools to deal with early challenges.

What is a learning disability or impairment?

The term "learning disability" can cover a wide array of problems that affect a person's ability to learn. Depending on the nature and degree of the disability, this can affect a person's ability to learn a little or a lot.

A learning disability can affect the way a person sees letters of the alphabet or their sequence in a word, resulting in difficulty with reading and spelling. Other learning disabilities can mean having a hard time putting thoughts on paper by printing or writing. Some people have trouble understanding ideas in sequence or following instructions.

Some people are also coping with Attention-Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). A person with ADHD is frequently impulsive and hyperactive and may have a very short attention span, reducing his or her ability to concentrate in the classroom. ADD can cause trouble concentrating, but does not always include hyperactive behaviour.

Recognizing a learning disability in children

Many children develop at different rates and may be temporarily behind their peers in some areas; however, a child with a learning disability may be:

- Consistently behind their peers' development by one or two years
- Unable to successfully grasp reading, writing or number problems
- Showing fine motor skill weakness, resulting in difficulties with printing, writing, cutting, sewing, colouring, etc.
- Easily distracted with a short attention span

Getting a professional assessment

Professional assessments are key in getting to the heart of the learning disability, and finding a way to support further learning. Assessments can be arranged with schools at any level, or through independent psychologists. A confirmation of learning disabilities will give you or your child some special rights.

Waiting lists for publicly-funded assessments can be long—over a year in many cases. Independent assessments can be an initially expensive process, but if feasible for you or your family, can pay off in early identification of both the disability and the strategies required to manage it.

Putting a plan in place

Depending on the type and degree of the learning disability and the services available in your community, the following options may be made available. Make a meeting with your child's teacher and other key administrators in their school if need-be. They may be entitled to, and benefit from, some of the following:

- Assistance in the classroom, either by teacher-modified instructions and curriculum or by additional special tuition or part-time remedial group instruction
- Placement in a special learning needs or LD classroom within the school, where the child will work alongside peers with similar disabilities on a specially modified curriculum and have a specially trained teacher
- Placement in a different school that wholly or partially caters to children with learning disabilities

Some parents, who are financially able, choose to supplement the school's endeavours with private coaching for their child by a specially trained tutor. To ensure that the child receives consistent learning strategies, it's essential that the tutor communicates with your child's teachers and ideally also with the psychologist who conducted the original assessment.

How parents can help

You may be feeling frustrated by your child's learning difficulties and by your inability to "wave a magic wand" and cure the problem.

However, there is a lot that you can do to help your child:

- **Become your child's advocate through the school years.** Become familiar with the laws relating to special needs children and be prepared to fight your way through the system, if necessary, to get the help your child needs. If your child has several teachers, ensure that they are all fully informed and aware of your child's special teaching needs.
- Many children with learning disabilities suffer from lowered self-esteem. **Explain to your child that he or she is not "dumb" in any way.** His or her brain simply learns things differently and needs to be given different tools. Constantly remind your child that he or she is a wonderful person. Give praise whenever it is warranted and try to praise efforts as well as successes.
- **Ensure that your child's teachers are aware of the extra need for positive feedback.**
- **State instructions clearly and simply.** Break tasks into smaller stages so that as each is completed there is an opportunity for the child to feel a sense of achievement and success.
- **Establish structure and routine in the home.**
- **Expose your child to different types of learning opportunities.** Some children with learning disabilities compensate for their reading or writing difficulties by developing advanced verbal communication and comprehension skills. Build on these skills through audio-taped guided tours through art galleries and museums and by visits to live theatre. Discuss your experiences afterwards.
- **If your child shows an interest or ability in other areas, such as music, art or athletics, encourage him/her to pursue these** in order to build confidence.

Though having a learning disability usually means extra challenges, these can be overcome, and people with learning disabilities can climb to great heights in their chosen field. With a clear diagnosis and the support you need, almost anything is possible.