Learning about learning disabilities: the importance of early diagnosis

It's hard enough for kids to fit in with friends, grasp school work and live up to parents' expectations. So when a learning disability presents itself, it can seem like an overwhelming obstacle. But learning disabilities are more common than you might think. They affect 10 per cent of Canadians.

And with early diagnosis comes improved odds of overcoming the learning disability (LD). In fact many well-known people—from actors, to innovative thinkers—have risen to the challenges of a learning disability and gone on to achieve great success.

Learn to spot the signs of an LD with the information below and remember: if you suspect a child in your life has an LD, get help from a trained health professional right away for an accurate diagnosis and treatment options.

Spotting a Learning Disability

LDs get in the way of receiving, organizing, retaining and understanding all types of information. They can be hard to diagnose, especially since the ways and speed at which kids learn are so different. Early detection can help give kids a leg-up on their LD. Areas that can cause problems for kids with LDs—either alone or in combination—include:

- **Visual** difficulties which interfere with the brain translating what the eyes see. Signs of trouble include forgetting faces, words, names or reversing written words and numbers (e.g., 41 becomes 14).
- **Auditory** challenges like trouble remembering what a person says or simple instructions are common LD markers. Confusing similar sounds or words (e.g., bee sounds like pea) can also signal auditory problems.
- **Motor** troubles which include challenges with hand-eye co-ordination (e.g., handwriting) as well as small and large muscle control which can cause clumsiness and difficulty with physical activities.
- **Organizational** issues which make organizing time, space and sequencing hard. Being too late or early and problems getting the steps right when carrying out a task—like getting dressed for school—may be cause for concern.
- **Conceptual** challenges that interfere with understanding abstract concepts, complex language, consequences and social cues could point to an LD. Kids who experience conceptual difficulties may not pick up on facial expressions or body language, only see black and white in a complicated situation and have poor social skills (e.g., not make eye contact, use improper tone of voice and/or body language).

There are also milestones kids reach that tell you development is on track.

Children with LDs may not reach some of these markers.

- **Infancy.** Babies who have trouble nursing, sucking or digesting and who resist cuddling and body contact may be showing early signs of a LD or other developmental issue. Also, look out for major delays in sitting, standing and walking.
- **Preschool.** Some kids who are slow to talk, continue to talk like babies, have trouble following directions and can't control behaviour might be at risk for an LD.

Physical signs can also include trouble bouncing and catching a ball or skipping.

- **K-Grade 4.** If your child is slow to learn the connection between letters and sounds, confuses basic words—like run, eat, want—and makes a lot of mistakes with spelling, reading and numbers, speak to his or her teacher who can refer you to a health professional to assess your child for an LD.
- **Grades 5-8.** If your child avoids reading out loud or written assignments, has difficulty making friends and is slow to recall facts, an LD may be the culprit.
- **Adolescence.** Bizarre spelling mistakes, disorganization—books a mess and notes everywhere—socializing with younger kids and a lack of judgment about their own personality are behaviours that can all point to an LD.

Some LDs—like trouble with speech—are easier to detect than others. Kids, parents and teachers form the best investigative team when it comes to diagnosing LDs. If all of the signs point towards an LD, talk with your child's teacher and seek out professional help right away. Though the challenge of an LD is life-long, with proper support and understanding, kids can overcome the obstacles to thrive both at school and in life.