

Resources for Working with Youth with Special Needs

Learning Disability

Alfred A. Strauss, M.D., in the 1940s, was the first to describe the behaviors of children now identified as learning disabled or LD. Children and adults with learning disabilities are not mentally retarded or "slow to learn;" rather, most of these individuals have average or above-average intelligence.

For an individual with a learning disability the messages to the brain become jumbled. This makes it difficult for them to learn in one or more of the academic areas; however, they can learn and become successful. For example, you may recognize some of these individuals who had LD: Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein, Beethoven, Louis Pasteur, Woodrow Wilson, Winston Churchill, and Nelson Rockefeller. They learned to compensate for their difficulties by learning in ways that are different from how other people may have learned.

Experts believe that there are between 6 to 10 million children with some type of learning disability. Research indicates that undetected learning disabilities may be the problem of a large number of children who do not do well in school.

The National Center for Learning Disabilities (<http://nclid.org/info/index.cfm>) lists some words commonly associated with learning disabilities that will be helpful as you work with youth with learning disabilities.

- Dyslexia, perhaps the most commonly known, is primarily used to describe difficulty with language processing and its impact on reading, writing, and spelling.
- Dysgraphia involves difficulty with writing. Problems might be seen in the actual motor patterns used in writing. Also characteristic are difficulties with spelling and the formulation of written composition.
- Dyscalculia involves difficulty with math skills and impacts math computation. Memory of math facts, concepts of time, money, and musical concepts can also be impacted.
- Dyspraxia (Apraxia) is a difficulty with motor planning, and impacts upon a person's ability to coordinate appropriate body movements.
- Auditory Discrimination is a key component of efficient language use, and is necessary to "break the code" for reading. It involves being able to perceive the differences between speech sounds, and to sequence these sounds into meaningful words.
- Visual Perception is critical to the reading and writing processes as it addresses the ability to notice important details and assign meaning to what is seen.
- Attention Deficit (Hyperactivity) Disorder (ADD/ADHD) may co-occur with learning disabilities (incidence estimates vary). Features can include: marked over-activity, distractibility, and/or impulsivity which in turn can interfere with an individual's availability to benefit from instruction.

Causes

As with many other disabilities, there is no one simple explanation that can be given for why a child or adult has a learning disability. Many factors may be responsible for learning disabilities. Some researchers believe that learning disabilities result from complications that occur before, during, or shortly after birth. Males are more likely to have a learning disability than females. Learning disabilities tend to occur in families.

Characteristics

Sometimes parents and others working with youth with learning disabilities are unaware about the disability and may think of the person as lazy, undisciplined, bored, stubborn, spoiled, underachieving, or daydreaming. It is important to remember that an individual with a learning disability usually does not show all the characteristics; likewise, an individual, without a learning disability may exhibit some of the characteristics. Some of the most common characteristics follow.

- Short attention span/easily distracted
- Poor memory/forgetful
- Difficulty following directions
- Poor reasoning ability
- Inability to set realistic goals
- Poor reading ability (e.g., adds, omits, skips words when reading)
- Difficulty distinguishing between p, g, b, d, and q
- Reads "on" for "no", "was" for "saw", etc.
- Difficulty with concepts left-right, above-below, up-down, yesterday-tomorrow, in-out, etc.
- Difficulty telling time
- Difficulty writing
- Poor eye-hand coordination
- Clumsy/accident prone
- Disorganized/loses things
- Quick tempered/easily irritated
- Impulsive
- Gets caught up in details
- Childish and bossy behavior
- Needs constant recognition
- A loner

Help For Leaders

- Have the individual's attention before you begin to do activities.
- Explain directions carefully, simply, and slowly.
- Repeat directions aloud to help the individual remember them.
- Encourage children to ask questions. If no questions are asked, review the important points, step-by-step.
- Have the child with a learning disability sit close to you so you can give extra help when necessary. He or she may feel more comfortable if he or she can bring a friend.
- Try various methods to see how the individual learns best. Determine if he or she learns best by seeing, hearing, reading silently, or reading aloud. If a child is good at remembering what he or she hears, then it might be a good idea to have someone read directions or record the information on a tape for the child to listen to.

- If you are reading from a book or manual, point out where you are in the text.
- Allow the individual to answer questions or keep records on a tape recorder if he or she has difficulty writing and spelling.
- Allow the individual to type if he or she has difficulty writing and spelling.
- Be patient. Children with learning disabilities need more time to think and complete projects.
- The breaking of any routine produces great anxiety. Provide security and structure.
- Each child is unique. Be sure to look at the whole child: his or her feelings, emotions, opinions, and problems. Be accepting and provide positive feedback. The child needs to know that he or she is "okay." Children with learning disabilities often feel that "I can't do anything right." "I'm no good." "I'm dumb." "Nobody likes me." "Everybody is picking on me."

These feelings cause the individual to feel frustrated, discouraged, alone or angry and to have a poor self-image, as well as difficulty with relationships. Be sure to talk about these feelings when they arise.

- Look for a spark and encourage the interest.
- Tasks may need to be divided into smaller pieces.
- Use modeling and demonstrations.
- Have youth repeat and rephrase directions to make certain they understand what you want them to accomplish.

Resources

Please note the University of Illinois Extension does not endorse any products advertised on the following internet sites. Also, the content of these internet links is subject to change, and thus their appropriateness as a resource may also change.

Learning Disabilities Association
<http://www.ldnati.org/>

The National Attention Deficit Disorder Association
<http://www.add.org/>

Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder - CHADD
<http://www.chadd.org/>

Sarkees-Wircenski, M., & Scott, J.L. (1995). Vocational Special Needs. Homewood, IL: American Technical Publishers, Inc.

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