

Learning Disorders

Learning disorders (or disabilities) are considered to be disorders of basic brain processes. There are several types of learning disorders, including mathematics, reading, written and oral expression, and listening comprehension. A child may have a learning disorder in a single area of functioning, such as reading, or may have multiple, overlapping learning disorders. Although many children have trouble learning in school from time to time, a child who is consistently having trouble with an academic subject or subjects at school may have a learning disorder.

MATHEMATICS

A mathematics learning disorder can occur in either math calculation or math reasoning. Problems with math calculation include difficulty learning basic math facts and performing basic math operations, such as addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. A problem with math reasoning includes difficulty solving math problems that is not simply the result of difficulties with math calculation. The two types of mathematics learning disorders can also occur together.

Typical signs and symptoms of a mathematics learning disorder include difficulty:

- Mastering numbers, such as counting or understanding quantities
- Learning and memorizing basic addition, subtraction, and multiplication facts, leading to slow and cumbersome calculating strategies
- Counting by 2's, 5's, 10's, or 100's
- Estimating
- Lining up numbers, resulting in calculation errors
- Comparing numbers (greater than or less than)
- Telling time
- Learning multiplication tables or formulas
- Interpreting graphs and charts
- Visualizing mathematics concepts, such as geometric shapes, numerical quantities, or rotation in space
- Holding mathematical information in his or her head long enough to complete a calculation

Learning disorders affect children from all racial, economic, and cultural backgrounds.



Once diagnosed with a learning disorder, a child is provided with services and or protections through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and/or Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (otherwise known as a 504 Plan). They may also be provided protections through the Americans with Disabilities Act. Depending on the nature of the disorder, certain protections and services may continue into adulthood.

- Understanding the language aspects of mathematics, such as understanding word problems
- Moving from concrete mathematical representations (for example, counting objects) to abstract representations (for example, using symbols and numbers to perform calculations)

READING

A reading learning disorder can occur in one of three areas: basic reading, reading comprehension, or reading fluency. Basic reading refers to the ability to decode words. Reading comprehension is the ability to make sense of and understand written information. Reading fluency refers to the ability to read quickly and fluidly. The three types of reading disorders may, and often do, occur together.

Typical signs and symptoms of a reading learning disorder include:

- Difficulty recognizing and remembering sight words (words that good readers should instantly recognize without having to “figure them out”)
- Frequently losing his or her place while reading
- Confusing similar-looking letters, numbers, or words (for example, beard and bread)
- Reversing letter order in words (for example, saw and was)
- Poor memory for printed words and new vocabulary
- Poor understanding of what has been read
- Significant trouble naming letters and learning to read
- Problems associating letters and sounds, understanding the difference between sounds in words, blending sounds into words
- Guessing at unfamiliar words rather than using word analysis skills (sounding them out)
- Reading very slowly
- Substituting or leaving out words while reading
- Disliking and avoiding reading or reading “reluctantly”

WRITTEN EXPRESSION

Children with this disorder have problems with their writing skills. This disorder often occurs with an oral expression learning disorder.

Typical signs and symptoms of a written expression learning disorder include:

- Difficulty formulating ideas into a logical, coherent sentences or paragraphs
- Consistent difficulty learning and applying grammatical concepts in written sentences (for example, capitalization, punctuation, conjugation, or noun-verb agreement)
- Poor spelling ability
- Poor handwriting ability
- Slow and labored writing (not due to motor disability)

ORAL EXPRESSION

Children with this disorder have problems expressing themselves verbally (by speaking).

Typical signs and symptoms of an oral expression learning disorder include:

- Consistent difficulty answering developmentally appropriate questions, often shown by a long pause between the time a question is asked and when the child answers
- Consistent difficulty formatting thoughts into speech (ideas are jumbled or confused and the meaning is often lost)
- Difficulty with word finding (cannot find the word to say, even though they know what they want to say)
- Difficulty giving directions or telling stories

Dyslexia

Although not a formal mental health diagnosis, dyslexia is a common term used for a type of reading learning disorder. Dyslexia generally affects a child's ability to decode and spell words. Dyslexia can occur in children of all different intelligence levels.

Typical signs and symptoms of dyslexia include having difficulty:

- Learning to speak
- Organizing language (for example, a child may reverse letters or words)
- Learning letters and their sounds
- Spelling
- Reading
- Learning a foreign language
- Calculating math equations
- Memorizing math facts



Bypass strategies

Bypass strategies are a way of “going around” a child’s learning disorder. An example of a bypass strategy is providing a child who has a mathematics calculation disability with a calculator. Another example would be providing books on tape to a child who has a disability of basic reading skills.

Depending on a child’s specific disorder and age, bypass strategies may be taught to children to help them learn what they can at a better pace.

Bypass strategies can help them keep up with classroom instruction and continue to benefit from instruction at his or her level or ability.

Bypass strategies should not replace appropriate instruction in the area of the learning disorder. This is particularly true when children are still young and are more likely to accept help.



LISTENING COMPREHENSION

Children with this disorder have difficulty listening to and understanding what others say.

Typical signs and symptoms of a listening comprehension learning disorder include:

- Difficulty following verbal instructions, particularly those with multiple steps
- Difficulty following along with class discussions
- Difficulty understanding vocabulary words
- Long pauses before answering questions
- Becoming confused or frustrated when information is presented verbally, but not when information is presented visually
- Becoming tired quickly when listening to stories or lectures
- Easily distracted in class

EVALUATION AND DIAGNOSIS

Early diagnosis (and treatment) of a learning disorder is extremely important. Early diagnosis can reduce the potential negative effects of having a learning disorder, such as low self-esteem, depression, and lack of success in school. As many children learn ways to compensate for their learning disorder, a learning disorder is typically diagnosed when a child’s ability to “hide” the disorder reaches its limit. If you think your child has a learning disorder, your child may need an educational evaluation. For more information, turn to **MENTAL HEALTH EVALUATIONS (p39)**.

TYPICAL CO-EXISTING DIAGNOSES

Common mental health diagnoses that co-exist with learning disorders include:

- Anxiety Disorders (p48)
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (p52)
- Autism Spectrum Disorders (Pervasive Developmental Disorders) (p54)
- Depression (p67)
- Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) (p82)
- Speech and Language Disorders (p90)

TREATMENT

All learning disorders are life-long conditions that do not go away. The treatment of a learning disorder varies by the specific diagnosis, as well as the child's age, development level, and strengths and weaknesses. A psychologist or a speech-language pathologist, depending on the specific disorder, can provide treatment. For more information on mental health specialists, turn to page 106 in **MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT**.

Some children with learning disorders may benefit from psychotherapy to address their social, behavioral, and emotional symptoms. This psychotherapy should be tailored to the child's language and cognitive abilities. Treatment may also include parent supports, including parent management training. For more information, turn to **MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT (p147)**.

Children with learning disorders may also need adjustments made to their education program. For more information on the school system, turn to page 118 in **MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT**.

Specialized reading programs, such as those that use the Orton-Gillingham approach or the Wilson Reading System, can be very effective for children with reading learning disorders. For more information about these programs, visit www.nclld.org.



Most children with learning disorders have average or above average intelligence. Because of their learning disorder, however, these children have difficulty acquiring the skills essential for school and work success.

RESOURCES

All Kinds of Minds: A Young Student's Book About Learning Abilities and Learning Disorders (1992)
By Melvin D. Levine

Learning Disabilities
Association of America
www.lidaamerica.org

National Center for Learning Disabilities
888-575-7373
www.nclld.org