



"Psychology Works" Fact Sheet: Learning Disabilities in Children

What is a Learning Disability?

The diagnosis of a learning disability, now referred to as a **specific learning disorder** in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-5th Edition (DSM-5), requires consistent difficulties learning and using academic skills (in reading, writing, spelling, and/or math) during school-age years, below what is expected given a child's age.

To receive this diagnosis, academic difficulties must not be caused by developmental, neurological, sensory (vision or hearing), or motor disorders, inadequate educational instruction, poor academic performance in a second language, and must significantly interfere with school or work performance, or with activities of daily living. There are various definitions and criteria for identifying a learning disability. While the DSM-5 outlines diagnostic criteria, the various Departments of Education in Canada and beyond have also established criteria for identifying a learning disability and determining the interventions and accommodations that might be required.

What about adults? A learning disability is essentially a lifelong condition that continues into adulthood, and may interfere with functioning at university, work, or during activities of daily living.

What a Learning Disability is Not

A learning disability is not the same as an **intellectual disability (intellectual developmental disorder)**, which in the past was referred to as mental retardation. Individuals with an intellectual disability have below average levels of intelligence (IQ) and have significant difficulties across mental abilities (e.g., language, knowledge, reading, writing, math, reasoning, memory). Individuals with an intellectual disability also struggle significantly with adaptive functioning or daily activities (e.g., getting dressed, feeding themselves, social interactions etc.).

Where Do Learning Disabilities Come From?

As discussed in DSM-5:

Environmental risk factors: Prenatal exposure to nicotine, alcohol, being born early (premature), or extremely low birth weight increase risk for a specific learning disorder.



Genetic/Biological risk factors: Specific learning disorders tend to run in families.

Behavioural/Cognitive risk factors: Preschool children with significant difficulties paying/sustaining attention are more at risk for developing later difficulties in reading and mathematics (not necessarily to the extent of a specific learning disorder). Early speech difficulties/delays and cognitive difficulties (e.g., short-term memory) also increase risk for specific learning disorders in reading or writing.

What Are Common Signs of a Potential Learning Disability in Children?

Along with struggling and/or getting low marks in some subjects at school, children suffering from a specific learning disorder may also show a number of behavioural and/or psychological symptoms; however, having these symptoms does not necessarily imply that a child is having learning difficulties as they can also originate from other causes.

Behavioural signs:

- **Boredom/distractibility:** if children are having a hard time understanding the lesson/work at home/school they can lose focus/stop paying attention, and engage in more interesting tasks (e.g., talking to friends, walking around). Often times, without a proper assessment, children with a learning disorder can be mis-labelled as having attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).
- **Behavioural outbursts:** children often become frustrated when they don't understand something, and since they often can't express their difficulties in words to their teacher/parents, they often do so by acting out (e.g., arguing, yelling, or leaving the class).
- **Defiance:** children may refuse to do what a teacher/parent asks of them because they don't know how, not because they are trying to be difficult on purpose.
- **Needing extra time to do work:** when a subject is really difficult for children and they need extra time to understand, they may not finish tests in the given amount of time and may take longer than classmates to complete homework/assignments.

Psychological signs:

- **Anxiety/worries:** children who have difficulty learning often start to worry about not doing well at school. This can lead to avoiding school, being emotional the night before or morning of school, increased stress/anxiety/outbursts around homework/tests/assignments etc.



- **Low self-esteem/mood:** until identified with a disability, children often don't know why they are struggling to learn and so often blame themselves and think they are "stupid" or "not as smart as other kids."

What To Do If You Suspect Your Child Has A Learning Disability?

Share your concerns with your child's teacher/school. Ask about what he or she has observed in terms of your child's learning. Teachers are often a good source for identifying available school resources and are often willing to come up with different strategies to try in the classroom and at home to help support your child's specific learning needs (e.g., using visual aids, more hands on activities). If trying new learning strategies is not successful, consider getting a formal assessment in order to identify your child's difficulties/needs. The sooner these needs are identified the better.

How Do I Have My Child Assessed For a Learning Disability?

As noted above, it is important to get an educational assessment for your child, in order to fully understand his or her needs, and to consider all of the reasons why he or she may be struggling at school (e.g. learning disorder, ADHD, language disorder, intellectual disability, anxiety, stress at home etc.).

A specific learning disorder is diagnosed through a review of your child's developmental, medical, educational, and family history, reports of test scores (intelligence/academic/achievement), and parent and teacher observations.

Where Do We Go For An Assessment?

A comprehensive psycho-educational assessment can be obtained in several ways Assessments are often provided through your child's **school**, community **mental health centres**, psychologists in **private practice**, and less frequently through mental health at the local **hospital**. Insurance plans will often cover a large portion of the assessment when obtained from outside of publicly funded institutions. Be sure to check with your insurance provider and that of your partner/spouse before ruling out this option. If seeking a psychologist who does assessments in your area, visit the following website: <http://www.cpa.ca/public/findingapsychologist/>; remember, because of the high demand for these assessments, wait times can be long.

Having your child's assessment done through their school is ideal. School psychologists work in collaboration with your child's teacher to provide comprehensive assessments of classroom functioning and develop plans for appropriate intervention. Any plans will be reviewed with you, and will be monitored and evaluated on a regular basis to ensure that the plan continues to



meet your child's developmental and learning needs. If the assessment is completed outside of the school, consultation with your child's teacher as part of the assessment, if possible, is preferred.

If wait times are too long, another option is to have an assessment done through a **private practice** in the community. Wait times are much shorter, however, private assessments can be quite costly, but may be covered by insurance.

How Can You Help Your Child Be Successful?

Once your child has received a diagnosis of a specific learning disorder, the school will often create an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) to support your child's learning, based on the recommendations in the assessment report. The IEP is a formal document that will be kept in your child's school record and will follow him or her from year to year to ensure an understanding of needs and stability of services; it is also important to have this document reviewed and revised each year to reflect current functioning. The IEP includes instructions to teachers on how your child learns best and how to help your child succeed in the classroom. For example, children with a writing disability may be given a computer to type assignments and tests. IEPs are reviewed and modified throughout your child's schooling and can even follow them to university or college. Similarly, accommodations can also be made in the workplace.

IEPs DO NOT reflect poorly on your child, or his or her chances of success after school (e.g. when applying to university or jobs), they simply show that your child learns differently than others and when supported the right way can be just as successful!

There are a number of famous people with a learning disability who are/were leaders in their fields. For example, Alexander Graham Bell who invented the telephone, Walt Disney, the former US president John F. Kennedy, and the actress and now television host Whoopi Goldberg all have/had a diagnosis of dyslexia (a form of reading disorder).

At home, and throughout your child's learning be flexible, understanding, and supportive that children with learning disabilities learn differently. Also don't be afraid to stand up for his or her learning needs; you are their parent and advocate!

Other Resources

For more information about learning disabilities and useful resources, visit:

Learning Disabilities Association of Canada website: <http://www.ldac-acta.ca/learn-more>

National Centre for Learning Disabilities: <http://www.nclld.org/>



You can consult with a registered psychologist to find out if psychological interventions might be of help to you. Provincial, territorial and some municipal associations of psychology often maintain referral services. For the names and coordinates of provincial and territorial associations of psychology, click <http://www.cpa.ca/public/whatisapsychologist/PTassociations/>.

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