

Understanding Learning Disabilities by Barbara Ashcroft B.A. M.ED.

As many as 20 percent of students in any given school may have some type of learning disability of varying degree. These students have average or above average intelligence and become extremely frustrated with their lack of academic success. Without early identification and appropriate teaching and evaluation strategies these young people lose their motivation for learning and develop low self esteem. Some get so discouraged they drop out.

What is a Learning Disability?

According to the Learning Disabilities Association of America:

A learning disability is a neurological disorder that affects one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using spoken or written language. The disability may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or do mathematical calculations.

A learning disability interferes with academic achievement as one or more of the processes required for learning may be impaired. This does not mean that students with a specific learning disability are intellectually delayed, or lazy; nor are they underachievers. They simply experience extreme difficulty with a certain psychological process. These students become very frustrated and angry when they are not achieving good grades. They may have a good understanding of the curriculum content, yet are not able to produce the test results that display this.

The Learning Disabilities Association of Canada states that learning disabilities may also involve difficulties with organizational skills, social perception, social interaction and perspective taking. Learning disabilities are not due to hearing or vision problems and are distinct from overall low intellectual functioning. A learning disability is very specific to each individual. Some researchers have referred to a learning disability as the invisible handicap. Learning disabilities are not clearly observable at first glance. In fact, most students appear to be quite capable until the academic test results start showing otherwise. Only an assessment by a qualified professional can pinpoint the particular area of weakness in the learning process and identify the disability.

Self Esteem

It doesn't take long for a young child to start to get down on himself when the learning disability begins to interfere with academic success. I have seen many young children give up too early and develop negative attitudes toward learning as they begin to think that they're no good. Once these negative self concepts develop, they are very difficult to erase. I know many successful adults who still berate themselves for their lack of school achievement although they have done well in their careers. It is family and school life experiences that contribute the most to our overall future feelings of self worth. Parents need to become very astute at observing how their child learns, and look for signs of a possible learning disability. Students themselves need to become aware of their strengths and weaknesses, and how they learn. Differences in individual learning styles should be valued and appreciated.

Signs of Possible Learning Disabilities

Early identification of a learning disability in children leads to early intervention by both parents and teachers. The sooner the home and school begin working together with specialized compensatory strategies, the better the child with the disability will progress. Parents and teachers need to look for signals that may warrant further investigation and formal assessment.

The child may:

- make consistent reading and spelling errors including letter reversals (b/d), inversion (m/w) transposition (felt/left), and substitutions (house/home)
- frequently lose his place while reading
- read but does not comprehend
- have an unstable pencil grip, and poor printing
- have difficulty expressing ideas on paper
- copy information incorrectly
- have problems listening and taking notes
- have difficulty following oral instructions
- have problems interpreting multiple written instructions
- find it difficult to memorize facts
- avoid reading and/or writing tasks
- have difficulty organizing materials and ideas
- have excellent verbal ability, but struggle to express thoughts on paper
- have trouble with math word problems
- have problems with focusing on a task
- have difficulty interpreting social cues
- be uncoordinated and clumsy
- may often lose things

Not every student will display all of these symptoms, but the existence of several of these characteristics would suggest that further formal assessment should be pursued. For students with learning disabilities, a school day can be long and frustrating if they do not have the appropriate teaching methods and accommodations for their specific disability. These students want to do well and have the intellectual ability to succeed when the disability is identified and understood.

Skills for Academic Success

In order to be successful in today's school systems **all students** need to be able to:

- Listen attentively for longer than 5 minutes
- Memorize facts
- Read quickly and comprehend text
- Organize their materials and schedule
- Plan and study for tests
- Write timed tests legibly
- Work co-operatively and independently

- Express ideas fluently in writing
- Maintain interest in all curriculum topics
- Be self-disciplined

For students with a learning disability who struggle with one or more of these skills, their school days become daily mountains to climb. Most of them are really exasperated and discouraged by the end of the day if special accommodations are not made for their learning deficits.

Alternate Evaluation

When educators focus solely on one method of evaluation they eliminate any chance for students with learning disabilities to prove their knowledge and understanding of curriculum material. For the most part, educational institutions still rely on the timed paper and pencil test to measure student success. When was the last time your boss gave you a paper and pencil test to evaluate your performance? Many students with learning disabilities thoroughly understand the content, yet cannot successfully complete a written timed test. Does that mean that their knowledge is less useful than others? These students may require oral, performance-based, and/or computer assisted methods of assessment.

Today's young people have grown up in a visual tactile era. Their visual and hands on skills have naturally outpaced their listening skills. Their capacity for learning and responding through visual tactile media far surpasses their ability to sit, listen and respond in long hand. Alternate methods of evaluation must become the norm in the educational system if we are to value the learning styles and preferences of all students. By insisting on the 'one size fits' all evaluation method we are losing students who learn differently and have great potential. Many students with learning disabilities have gone on to be very successful in life outside the school system. When they learn how to use their strengths and compensate for the disability, these young people can soar.

Successful People with Learning Disabilities

Many public figures have specific learning disabilities and have become very successful in spite of them. Some performers deal constantly with mild dyslexia (reading difficulties). Tony Bennett struggles with reading sheet music; Jay Leno got C's and D's in school with the same problem. Patrick Dempsey of Grey's Anatomy strains while reading scripts and memorizing his lines. Vince Vaughn had Special Education support for his reading difficulties. All of them learned coping strategies to work around their problems, and combined with their ongoing persistence to succeed have turned their talents and strengths into great advantages.

All children come to school eager and excited to learn. Many children with learning disabilities become totally discouraged by grade three. All children want to learn. All children have ability. Some children have a particular learning weakness, yet have other amazing gifts. It is up to the home and school to identify these strengths and weaknesses and employ appropriate teaching and evaluation methods that bring out the best in all kids. All students can learn. All young people can succeed.

Websites providing additional information:

<http://www.ldonline.org>
<http://www.ldac-taac.ca/>
<http://www.ldanatl.org>
<http://www.ncld.org>

LD resources
The Learning Disabilities Association of Canada
The Learning Disabilities Association of America
The National Centre for Learning Disabilities

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