

Learning Disabilities: Signs, Symptoms and Strategies

“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 to do mathematical calculations.”

Every individual with a learning disability is unique and shows a different combination and degree of difficulties. A common characteristic among people with learning disabilities is uneven areas of ability, “a weakness within a sea of strengths.” For instance, a child with dyslexia who struggles with reading, writing and spelling may be very capable in math and science.

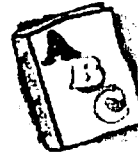
Learning disabilities should not be confused with learning problems which are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps; of mental retardation; of emotional disturbance; or of environmental, cultural or economic disadvantages.

Generally speaking, people with learning disabilities are of average or above average intelligence. There often appears to be a gap between the individual's potential and actual achievement. This is why learning disabilities are referred to as “hidden disabilities:” the person looks perfectly “normal” and seems to be a very bright and intelligent person, yet may be unable to demonstrate the skill level expected from someone of a similar age.

A learning disability cannot be cured or fixed; it is a lifelong challenge. However, with appropriate support and intervention, people with learning disabilities can achieve success in school, at work, in relationships, and in the community.

In Federal law, under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the term is “specific learning disability,” one of 13 categories of disability under that law. “Learning Disabilities” is an “umbrella” term describing a number of other, more specific learning disabilities to include the following:

Dyslexia: Reading and related language-based learning disabilities



Signs and Symptoms

- Reads slowly and painfully
- Experiences decoding errors, especially with the order of letters
- Shows wide disparity between listening comprehension and reading comprehension of some text
- Has trouble with spelling
- May have difficulty with handwriting
- Exhibits difficulty recalling known words
- Has difficulty with written language
- May experience difficulty with math computations
- Decoding real words is better than nonsense words
- Substitutes one small sight word for another: a, I, he, the, there, was
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Dyscalculia: Problems with arithmetic and math concepts



Signs and Symptoms

- Shows difficulty understanding concepts of place value, and quantity, number lines, positive and negative value, carrying and borrowing
- Has difficulty understanding and doing word problems
- Has difficulty sequencing information or events
- Exhibits difficulty using steps involved in math operations
- Shows difficulty understanding fractions
- Is challenged making change and handling money
- Displays difficulty recognizing patterns when adding, subtracting, multiplying, or dividing
- Has difficulty putting language to math processes
- Has difficulty understanding concepts related to time such as days, weeks, months, seasons, quarters, etc.
- Exhibits difficulty organizing problems on the page, keeping numbers lined up, following through on long division problems



Dysgraphia: Writing or fine motor skills deficit

Signs and Symptoms

- May have illegible printing and cursive writing (despite appropriate time and attention given the task)
- Shows inconsistencies: mixtures of print and cursive, upper and lower case, or irregular sizes, shapes or slant of letters
- Has unfinished words or letters, omitted words
- Inconsistent spacing between words and letters
- Exhibits strange wrist, body or paper position
- Has difficulty pre-visualizing letter formation
- Copying or writing is slow or labored
- Shows poor spatial planning on paper
- Has cramped or unusual grip/may complain of sore hand
- Has great difficulty thinking and writing at the same time (taking notes, creative writing.)



Dyspraxia: Problems with motor coordination

Signs and Symptoms

- Exhibits poor balance; may appear clumsy; may frequently stumble
- Shows difficulty with motor planning
- Demonstrates inability to coordinate both sides of the body
- Has poor hand-eye coordination
- Exhibits weakness in the ability to organize self and belongings
- Shows possible sensitivity to touch
- May be distressed by loud noises or constant noises like the ticking of a clock or someone tapping a pencil
- May break things or choose toys that do not require skilled manipulation
- Has difficulty with fine motor tasks such as coloring between the lines, putting puzzles together; cutting accurately or pasting neatly
- Irritated by scratchy, rough, tight or heavy clothing

Central Auditory Processing Disorder: Difficulty processing and remembering language-related tasks



Signs and Symptoms

- Has difficulty processing and remembering language-related tasks but may have no trouble interpreting or recalling non-verbal environmental sounds, music, etc.
- May process thoughts and ideas slowly and have difficulty explaining them
- Misspells and mispronounces similar-sounding words or omits syllables; confuses similar-sounding words (celery/salary; belt/built; three/free; jab/job; bash/batch)
- May be confused by figurative language (metaphor, similes) or misunderstand puns and jokes; interprets words too literally
- Often is distracted by background sounds/noises
- Finds it difficult to stay focused on or remember a verbal presentation or lecture
- May misinterpret or have difficulty remembering oral directions: difficulty following directions in a series
- Has difficulty comprehending complex sentence structure or rapid speech
- “Ignores” people, especially if engrossed
- Says “What?” a lot, even when has heard much of what was said

Non-Verbal Learning Disorders: Trouble with nonverbal cues, e.g., body language, poor coordination, clumsy



Signs and Symptoms

- Has trouble recognizing nonverbal cues such as facial expression or body language
- Shows poor psycho-motor coordination: clumsy; seems to be constantly “getting in the way,” bumping into people and objects
- Using fine motor skills a challenge: tying shoes, writing, using scissors
- Needs to verbally label everything that happens to comprehend circumstances, spatial orientation, directional concepts and coordination; often lost or tardy
- Has difficulty coping with changes in routing and transitions
- Has difficulty generalizing previously learned information
- Has difficulty following multi-step instructions
- Make very literal translations
- Asks too many questions, may be repetitive and inappropriately interrupt the flow of a lesson
- Imparts the “illusion of competence” because of the student’s strong verbal skills

Visual Perceptual/Visual Motor Deficit: Reverses letters; cannot copy accurately; loses place; struggles with cutting



Signs and Symptoms

- May have reversals: b for d, p for q or inversions: u for n, w for m
- Has difficulty negotiating around campus
- Complains eyes hurt and itch, rubs eyes, complains print blurs while reading
- Turns head when reading across page or holds paper at odd angles
- Closes one eye while working, may yawn while reading
- Cannot copy accurately
- Loses place frequently
- Does not recognize an object/word if only part of it is shown
- Holds pencil too tightly; often breaks pencil point/crayons
- Struggles to cut or paste
- Misaligns letters; may have messy papers, which can include letters colliding, irregular spacing, letters not on line

Language Disorders: Aphasia, Dysphasia or Global

Aphasia: Trouble understanding spoken language; poor reading comprehension



Signs and Symptoms

- Has difficulty gaining meaning from spoken language
- Demonstrates poor written output
- Exhibits poor reading comprehension
- Shows difficulty expressing thoughts in verbal form
- Has difficulty labeling objects or recognizing labels

- Is often frustrated by having a lot to say and no way to say it
- Feels that words are “right on the tip of my tongue”
- Can describe an object and draw it, but can't think of the word for it
- May be depressed or having feelings of sadness
- Has difficulty getting jokes

Courtesy of *Learning Disabilities Association of America*