

Learning Disabilities

Learning disabilities can slow your child's progress in school. One common problem is dyslexia, a specific reading disability. Attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) may also be seen as a learning disability. Your child should receive assessment and an individualized educational plan to help deal with his or her learning disability.

What are learning disabilities?

Learning disabilities are disorders affecting specific abilities needed for school performance, such as reading, doing math, movement skills, or attention and focusing. Such problems don't mean that your child isn't smart; learning disabilities usually occur in children with normal intelligence.

Every child learns differently. A learning disability may be present if your child is having problems with schoolwork. Learning disabilities can be linked to social, behavioral, and self-esteem problems as well.

Every child suspected of having a learning disability should have a professional assessment, including an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP). Children with learning disabilities may be helped a lot by some relatively simple steps, such as additional help in certain areas or special adjustments in the classroom. Our office can help put you in touch with the educational resources your child needs and by providing additional follow-up.

What are the types of learning disabilities?

Every child with learning disabilities is different. Some common learning disabilities are:

- *Dyslexia*. A specific reading disability. Your child may read very slowly and inaccurately. He or she may have difficulty "decoding" and recognizing words and reading print. Yet he or she may learn very well when material is read aloud.
- *Dyscalculia*. A specific math disability. Your child has trouble with math calculations; he or she can't seem to memorize math facts or remember the steps needed to solve problems. Some children with language disabilities or attention problems have trouble learning math as well.
- *Dysgraphia*. A specific writing disability. Your child's writing may be difficult to read and his or her handwriting messy. Your child may have difficulty organizing and expressing ideas. Spelling may be difficult as well.
- *Dyspraxia*. A specific disability of fine muscle control. Your child may have difficulty using a pencil or scissors,

tying shoes, or typing on a keyboard. Other children have problems with large muscle control, such as catching or throwing a ball.

- *Attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)*. Not a specific learning disorder but causes many problems in school (and at home). Your child may have difficulty paying attention, sitting still, or controlling impulses.

Learning disabilities may affect many other areas as well, such as memory, language, or social skills. Children may have more than one type of learning disability. Problems in one area (such as reading) may cause problems with many different school subjects.

In addition to school problems, learning disabilities can affect other areas of your child's life. "Feeling like a failure" may make your child anxious or depressed. Feelings of low self-esteem and not having control over his or her life are common.

What causes learning disabilities?

Usually, no specific cause of learning disabilities is identified. Genetic, medical, environmental, social, and cultural factors may all play a role.

What are some possible complications of learning disabilities?

Without educational interventions, children with learning disabilities can fall behind in school. In the long term, failure and frustration can lead to problems with self-esteem and motivation.

What puts your child at risk of learning disabilities?

Learning disabilities are common. The U.S. Department of Education estimates that about 5% of all children in public schools have a learning disability. Possible risk factors include:

- Genetics. Reading disabilities seem to run in families.
- Preterm birth and other events around the time of birth.
- Medical conditions, such as lead poisoning, infections, or brain injury.

How are learning disabilities evaluated?

If a learning disability is suspected, your child should undergo a complete evaluation, including:

- A physical examination, to make sure there are no contributing medical problems.
- Developmental evaluation, to assess your child's level of development for his or her age.
- A mental health evaluation, to identify any family or psychological issues that may be contributing to your child's problems at school.

Depending on the nature of your child's educational problems, various other specialists may be involved, for example, a speech and language pathologist, an occupational therapist, a neurologist, or a social worker.

Evaluations conducted by schools are usually very helpful. However, they are sometimes limited by budgetary, personnel, and other constraints. If you have concerns about the adequacy of your child's evaluation, make sure to discuss them with your child's doctor.

How are learning disabilities treated?

Educational interventions are probably the most important aspect of care:

- *Early intervention* can lessen the impact of learning disabilities on your child's school performance and other areas of life.
- *Special education* services are also available in every state. You are entitled to evaluation and educational services for your child. Based on the results, an Individualized Education Program (IEP) can be developed to meet your child's educational needs.
- *Having a learning disability doesn't mean your child isn't smart.* It also doesn't mean that he or she is lazy. It simply means that he or she has problems with specific learning skills. Your child's educational program should help to deal with his or her educational weaknesses while maximizing strengths. Recommendations may include:
 - *"Bypass" strategies* to limit the impact of your child's learning disability. For example, children with writing difficulties may be allowed to make oral rather than written reports. Children with attention problems may be seated closer to the teacher.
 - *Remediation strategies* to strengthen the "weak links" in your child's learning process. This may include tutoring in specific areas like math or reading or more general areas such as study skills. Working on these areas with your child at home can be very helpful. For children with dyslexia (reading disorder), special instruction in phonics may help.
 - *Developmental therapies.* These include speech and language therapy for children with language disorders or occupational therapy for certain kids with writing problems.
 - *Increasing strengths.* The plan should include opportunities for your child to develop areas that he or she is strong in, not just focusing on weaknesses.
 - *Counseling* may help your child in dealing with stress and other issues related to the learning disability. It may include your child alone or your entire family.
 - *Medications* may be part of the treatment plan, for example, if your child has attention problems.
 - *Diets, exercise programs, and other alternative treatments* are sometimes recommended for children with certain learning disabilities. Although some parents strongly believe in these alternative treatments, most have not been proved effective in scientific studies. Be wary before investing too much time and money in unproven treatments.



When should I call your office?

Call our office if you have concerns about your child's school performance or about the evaluation and treatment of his or her learning disabilities.