



# What is a Learning Disability?

A learning disability affects the way children of average to above average intelligence receive, process, or express information and lasts throughout life. It impacts the ability to learn the basic skills of reading, writing, or math.

The Coordinated Campaign for Learning Disabilities (CCLD), a coalition of national organizations within the learning disabilities community, defines LD as “a neurobiological disorder in which a person’s brain works or is structured differently.”

*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders — Fourth Edition (DSM-IV)*, used by psychologists and medical doctors, doesn’t list “learning disability,” but describes disorders in reading, mathematics, and written expression. Academic achievement, as measured by standardized tests, must be substantially below expectations for the child’s chronological age, intelligence, and age-appropriate education.

**“If you suspect that your child may have LD, consult with her teacher and other school staff to decide next steps.”**

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the federal law that provides for special education, defines “specific learning disability” as a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using spoken or written language. Skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and/or mathematics may be negatively affected.

## What a Learning Disability is Not:

Attention disorders, such as Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and learning disabilities often occur at the same time, but they’re not the same.

Learning disabilities are not the same as mental retardation, autism, hearing or visual impairment, physical disabilities, emotional disorders, or the normal process of learning a second language.

- Learning disabilities aren’t caused by lack of educational opportunities, such as frequent changes of schools, poor school attendance, or lack of instruction in basic skills.

### Facts about LD:

- **Difficulty with basic reading and language skills are the most common LD.**
- **LD may be inherited.**
- **LD affect girls as frequently as they do boys.**
- **Kids don’t outgrow or get cured of LD.**
- **With support and intervention, kids with LD can be successful in learning and life.**

## What Should You Look For?

Most children have some problems in school at one time or another. Some struggle with a specific subject while others have trouble relating to a certain style of teaching. Sometimes learning disabilities are blamed on lack of motivation, immaturity, or behavior problems. But if your child has significant ongoing problems with the “3 R’s” — basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic — then he may have a learning disability.

Because each child has a unique set of strengths and challenges, you’ll want to talk with the teacher, other school staff, family members, and your child to get their input. As you think about the following factors, ask yourself if your child has shown these characteristics to a greater degree than normal for her age, over a period of time, and in different environments, e.g., school, home, child care settings, community.

### Preschool

- Speaks later than most kids
- Is unable to find the right word when carrying on a conversation
- Can’t rapidly name words in a specific category
- Has difficulty rhyming
- Has trouble learning alphabet, days of the week, colors, shapes, numbers
- Is extremely restless and easily distracted
- Can’t follow directions or routines

### Grades K-4

- Is slow to learn the connections between letters and sounds
- Can't blend sounds to make words
- Makes consistent reading and spelling errors
- Has problems remembering sequences and telling time
- Is slow to learn new skills
- Has difficulty planning

### Grades 5-8

- Is slow to learn prefixes, suffixes, root words, and other reading strategies
- Avoids reading aloud
- Has difficulty with word problems in math
- Spells the same word differently in a single piece of writing
- Avoids reading and writing tasks
- Has difficulty remembering or understanding what she had read
- Works slowly
- Has difficulty understanding and/or generalizing concepts
- Misreads directions and information



### Assessment for LD

If you suspect that your child may have LD, consult with her teacher and other school staff to decide next steps. A pre-referral support team may be one option.

Remember that the public school is obligated to assess your child to see if she has a disability and needs special education services to benefit from her general education program. This is true whether she attends a public or private school. The public school is not legally required to provide a diagnosis, give you more information for her tutor, or qualify her for extra time on college entrance exams.

Under law, LD must be identified by a group of professionals from different fields, a multidisciplinary team, who has assessed your child. While public schools must consider reports you obtained privately, they have the right to assess your child before making any decisions.

Following assessment, the public school team will meet with you to discuss the results and decide if your child is eligible for special education services at the public school. Whether or not she's eligible, evaluation results can be used to plan her educational program, help her understand her learning disabilities, and find ways to be successful.

### What Can You Do?

With the right support and interventions, your child can succeed in school and become a successful adult. You can help her in the following ways:

- Speak with her openly and acknowledge her learning difficulties.
- Remind her that she is intelligent but has a different way of learning.
- Identify her strengths and talents, and encourage her to develop them.
- Coach her on strategies that will help her through her learning challenges.
- Support her efforts to succeed.
- Be available to help her with homework.
- Be a role model — read a book or newspaper or write a letter while she studies.
- Set realistic goals and expectations.
- Work collaboratively with school staff.
- Understand the educational system.
- Listen to your child when she wants to talk.
- Teach her to understand her own needs and advocate for them.
- Appreciate her for her uniqueness, special qualities, and contributions.

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