



CHILDREN'S HEALTHCARE RESOURCE NETWORK

If this is a possible life-threatening illness or injury, call 911 immediately.

SickKid.Net is committed to assisting you with a variety of health information and resources for your children. Our organization is dedicated to helping you with sick childcare needs, when you need it most.

Children's Hospital Spotlight

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Learning Disabilities

Does your child have a learning disability?

by Christopher J. Nicholls, Ph.D.

The self-esteem of kindergarten and first grade students often hinges upon their success in mastering the early recognition of letters, numbers and symbols. Confidence grows as we start making sense of those funny looking shapes on paper, while shame and embarrassment goes along with realizing that others are starting to read, while you just don't get it. Older children discover that it doesn't get easier - they have to switch from learning to read, to reading to learn. Comprehension, speed, and accuracy become more important in reading, and simple counting gives way to the more complicated "gazintas" of division (you know, two gazinta six three times...)

Many children – about one in twenty – struggle with these developing skills, and will eventually be labeled as having a "learning disability." What does this mean? What should parents do? Where should you turn? This article will help to introduce you to these topics, and give you some beginning suggestions.

Learning disabilities are not all the same. There are listening troubles, speaking troubles, difficulties in sounding out words and difficulties in understanding paragraphs. Some people have troubles with mathematics calculation, while some have more troubles knowing how to set up the problem. Writing can also be hard, both in terms of making the letter shapes themselves, to organizing what you want to say so that it makes sense. Students (and their parents) can find any of these areas difficult to master, and often the basic short-circuit in the brain causes other kinds of problems, too. Children who don't quickly understand what they see often miss out on little facial expressions and social cues. Kids whose speech is hard to understand learn to keep quiet rather than to be teased and criticized by others who think they do it on purpose, or are "slow." Often times, children with learning disorders have other troubles too. Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorders, for example, often add to the struggles children face in school by causing them to be impulsive, to blurt out at the wrong time, or to seem spacey and "out of it." Repeated failure and criticism leads to depression, and anxiety.

It is important to understand, however, that learning disabilities do not mean that the child is slow, lazy, bad, or crazy. A child who has missed out on key educational experiences, or who is crippled by poverty, or who has another kind of medical disease or disability may also have troubles in school, but does not have a learning disability. Children who learn slowly may also lag behind their peers, but are not considered learning disabled.

People are different. Each of us is unique, and we all have our areas of strength and ability. Many, many famous, successful, and talented people have had learning disabilities. Like all disabilities, problems in

learning don't mean that you are unable, only that your brain has certain roadblocks to learning in the usual way. The key is therefore to identify what each child's strengths are, as well as where they may need help. Usually, the best way to identify these strengths and weaknesses is to have the child take a battery of tests that look at the different ways we learn. This process is available through the public schools, for students who are having a hard time mastering school work.

Testing usually means that the student will meet with a professional who will ask the student to do certain types of tasks, such as answering questions about what they know of the world, defining vocabulary words, working at jigsaw puzzles, and taking tests of memory and learning speed. These tests are given in private, and the professionals try to get the very best effort from the child. What comes out of the testing is a picture of the child's abilities, as compared with other children of the same age. This allows the parents and professionals to understand if, and where a problem exists.

Learning disabilities are better and better understood, as science learns more about how the brain works. Early identification is the key! If a student is struggling early on in school, don't wait or listen to those who say "Oh he'll grow out of it." An extra year will not make a problem go away – the child will just be older, and more embarrassed.

We now know what many learning disabilities look like, even at young (preschool and kindergarten) ages. Teachers and other professionals now have lots of tools to help those with learning disabilities. Getting an early start can make all the difference in the long run!

What should a parent do? If you have concerns about your child's learning skills, especially if learning troubles were present in yourself or your extended family, jump at the chance to prevent later problems. Ask for the school to perform an evaluation, or seek out a private professional to do it for you. Understand, however, that many school districts will not label a child as having a learning disability until they have already failed. And yet, the research shows that helping children with reading problems means we must identify them before the age of nine. Waiting too long for an evaluation can also lead to feelings of despair, anger, and fear in the child. Don't wait, it's too important.

Where can you turn for help? The first place to start is with your child's doctor. Make sure they can see and hear well. Rule out any medical problems that can be fixed (like chronic ear infections). Next, ask the local school to perform an evaluation. Schools are required to identify disabled children as early as age three – speak up!

If you are concerned that your child is having troubles in a certain area of learning, ask for information about that type of learning. Ask librarians, teachers, counselors, tutors. Look up local support groups, and check out the web sites for the National Center for Learning Disabilities (www.nclld.org), and I donline (www.idonline.org).

The most important thing you can do, however, is to love your children and let them know that you will be there to help them, all the way through school, and beyond!

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