

Learning Disabilities

What Parents Need to Know



Your child will learn many things in life—how to listen, speak, read, write, and do math. Some skills may be harder to learn than others. If your child is trying his best to learn certain skills but is not able to keep up with his peers, it's important to find out why. Your child may have a learning disability (also known as LD). If your child has an LD, the sooner you know, the sooner you can get your child help. Your child can succeed in school, work, and relationships. Read on for more information from the American Academy of Pediatrics about LDs.

What is an LD?

Learning disability is a term used to describe a range of learning problems. These problems have to do with the way the brain gets, uses, stores, and sends out information. As many as 15% of children have an LD. Children with LDs may have trouble with one or more of the following skills: reading, writing, listening, speaking, reasoning, and math. The most common type of LD is a reading disorder.

A child is not considered to have an LD if the learning problems are due to another cause, such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), intellectual disability (formerly called mental retardation), lack of instruction, or a hearing, vision, or motor problem. It's important to understand, though, that some children may have an LD and one or more other conditions that can affect learning. Many children also have more than one LD.

What causes LDs?

There can be many possible causes. The causes aren't always known, but in many cases children with LDs have a parent or relative with the same or similar learning difficulties. Other risk factors include low birth weight and prematurity, or an injury or illness during childhood (for example, head injury, lead poisoning, a childhood illness like meningitis).

How do I know if my child has an LD?

Learning disabilities aren't always obvious. However, there are some signs that could mean your child needs help. Keep in mind that children develop and learn at different rates. Let your child's doctor know if your child shows any of the following signs:

Preschool children (who may later have LDs) may have

- Delays in language development. By 2½ years of age, your child should be able to talk in short sentences.
- Trouble with speech. By 3 years of age, your child should speak well enough so that adults can understand most of what she says.
- Trouble learning colors, shapes, letters, and numbers.
- Trouble rhyming words.
- Trouble with coordination. By 5 years of age, your child should be able to button her clothing, use scissors to cut shapes out of paper, and hop. She should be able to copy a circle, square, or triangle.

- Short attention spans. Between 3 to 5 years of age, your child should be able to sit still and listen to a short story. As your child gets older, she should be able to pay attention for a longer time.

School-aged children and teens with LDs may find it difficult to

- Follow directions.
- Get and stay organized at home and school.
- Understand verbal directions.
- Learn facts and remember information.
- Read, spell, or sound out words.
- Write clearly (may have poor handwriting).
- Do math calculations or word problems.
- Focus on and finish schoolwork (may daydream a lot).
- Explain information clearly with speech or in writing.

What are common LDs?

The following are some common LDs. Keep in mind that not every child with an LD fits neatly within one of these types. Careful evaluation is important.

Reading disorder

Children with a reading disorder (also called dyslexia, reading disability, and specific reading disability) may have difficulties with

- Remembering the names of letters and the sounds they make
- Understanding that words are made up of sounds and that letters stand for those sounds
- Sounding out words correctly and at the right speed
- Spelling words correctly
- Understanding what they read

Writing disorder

Children with a writing disorder may have difficulties with

- Using a pen or pencil
- Remembering how letters are formed
- Copying shapes, drawing lines, or spacing things out correctly
- Organizing and writing their thoughts, feelings, and ideas on paper
- Spelling and punctuation

Math disorder

Children with a math disorder may have difficulties with

- Recognizing and drawing shapes
- Math concepts such as number values, quantity, and order
- Understanding time, money, and measuring
- Fractions, percentages, geometry, and algebra

Other learning problems

Some children with learning problems may not exactly fit the types of LDs previously mentioned. These learning problems may include the following:

Nonverbal learning skills

Children who have trouble with nonverbal learning skills (often called nonverbal LD) may have

- Trouble copying designs and understanding 3-dimensional patterns
- Trouble understanding abstract concepts
- Trouble with math, writing, and reading comprehension
- Problems with social skills and understanding nonverbal cues like body language
- Poor coordination

Speech and language delays

Children with speech and language delays may have

- Trouble reading and writing
- Trouble with math word problems
- Trouble following directions
- Trouble answering questions

ADHD

Children with ADHD may have

- Trouble focusing or paying attention
- Trouble remembering information
- Trouble completing schoolwork or homework

Is there a cure?

There is no single cure for LDs, but there are many things that can be done to help children overcome their LD and live successful lives. Be cautious of people and groups who claim to have simple answers or solutions. You may hear about eye exercises, body movements, special diets, vitamins, and nutritional supplements. There's no good evidence that these work. If in doubt, talk with your child's doctor. Also, you can contact trusted resources like the ones listed at the end of this publication for more information.

Who can help?

If you're concerned about your child's problems with learning or think your child may have an LD, talk with your child's teacher and doctor. Teachers and other education specialists can perform screening or evaluation tests to determine if there's a problem. Your child's doctor may want to test your child's vision and hearing to rule out other possible problems. You may also want to see a pediatrician who specializes in neurodevelopmental disabilities, developmental and behavioral pediatrics, or child neurology. Other professionals who can help are psychologists and private educational specialists.

Most children who have problems learning can reach their goals by developing different ways of learning. Special educational services to help children with LDs may be available in your area. These may include specialized instruction, non-timed tests, or sometimes changes in the classroom that are geared toward your child's specific learning style. One way to ensure that your child is being helped is for teachers and parents (and sometimes your child's doctor) to meet and develop a written plan that clearly describes the services your child needs. This plan is called an Individualized Education Program (IEP). Once an IEP is in place, it should be reviewed regularly to make sure your child's needs are being met.

Ways you can help your child

- **Focus on strengths.** All children have special talents as well as weaknesses. Find your child's strengths and help her learn to use them. Your child might be good at math, music, or sports. She could be skilled at art, working with tools, or caring for animals. Be sure to praise your child often when she does well or succeeds at a task.
- **Develop social and emotional skills.** Learning disabilities combined with the challenges of growing up can make your child sad, angry, or withdrawn. Help your child by providing love and support while acknowledging that learning is hard because his brain learns in a different way. Try to find clubs, teams, and other activities that focus on friendship and fun. These activities should also build confidence. And remember, competition isn't just about winning.
- **Plan for the future.** Many parents of children with LDs worry about their child's future. Remind your child that an LD isn't tied to how smart she is. In fact, many people with LDs are very bright and grow up to be very successful in life. You can help your child plan for adulthood by encouraging her to consider her strengths and interests when making education and career choices. There are special career and vocational programs that help build confidence by teaching decision-making and job skills. Many colleges have programs designed for students with LDs.

Remember

Children with LDs can learn and succeed if they get the right help and support. The sooner you know, the sooner you can get your child help. Talk with your child's doctor if you have any concerns about your child's learning.

Where can I find more information?

If you have any questions about LDs, contact your child's doctor or any of the following resources:

American Academy of Pediatrics National Center for Medical Home Implementation

www.medicalhomeinfo.org

Council for Exceptional Children

www.cec.sped.org

LD OnLine (information about LDs)

www.ldonline.org

Learning Disabilities Association of America

www.ldanatl.org

Learning Disabilities Worldwide

www.ldworldwide.org

National Center for Learning Disabilities

www.nclld.org

Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services

www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers

Wrightslaw (information about special education law)

www.wrightslaw.org

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The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

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