

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. There can be many reasons. If your child has a learning disability (also known as an LD), the sooner you know, the sooner you can get your child help. Your child can learn how to succeed in school, work, and relationships.

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. Children with LDs may have trouble with one or more of the following skills: reading, writing, listening, speaking, reasoning, and math. Some children may have attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) affecting school progress. This isn't the same as learning problems that are mainly caused by visual, hearing, or motor disabilities.

What causes LDs?

There could be many possible causes. The causes aren't always known. Often children with learning disabilities have a parent or relative with the same or similar learning difficulties. In some cases, children were born with a low birth weight or prematurely. In other cases, an injury or illness during childhood may have been the cause (for example, severe 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 pediatrician know if your child shows any of the following signs:

Preschool children 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 with coordination.** By 5 years of age, your child should be able to button, cut, 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 get older, she should be able to pay attention for a longer time.

School-aged children and teens may find it difficult to

- Follow directions.
- Get and stay organized at home and school.
- Understand verbal directions.
- Learn facts and remember information.
- Learn certain subjects taught in school (for example, math, reading, spelling) but seem smart in other subjects.
- Fit in with their peers or communicate with others.
- Sound words out and read or spell.
- Write clearly (may have poor handwriting).
- Concentrate and finish schoolwork (may daydream a lot).
- Explain information clearly with speech or in writing.

What are common LDs?

The following are brief descriptions of some common learning disabilities. Keep in mind, not every child with an LD fits neatly within one of these types. Careful evaluation is important.

Children with a **reading disorder**

- May not remember the names of letters and the sounds they make.
- May not understand words that are read to them.
- May not understand that words are made up of sounds and that letters stand for those sounds.
- May not be able to sound out words at the right speed and correctly.
- May have trouble spelling.
- May take longer to read words they know.

Children with a **writing (graphomotor, written expression) disorder**

- May have trouble using a pen or pencil.
- May not remember how letters are formed.
- May have trouble copying shapes or drawing lines and spacing things out correctly.
- May have trouble writing words to express themselves.
- May have trouble organizing and writing their thoughts on paper.

Children with a **math disorder**

- May have trouble with math concepts such as number values, quantity, and order.
- May have trouble with fractions, percentages, geometry, and algebra.
- May have trouble with things like time, money, and measuring.
- May have other problems, including problems with shapes and drawing.

Children with **nonverbal LDs**

- May have problems with nonverbal cues, like body language.
- May have poor coordination.

Children with **speech and language disabilities**

- May have problems understanding and using language (this may affect how well they can read and write).
- May struggle to understand instructions or new information.

Children with **central auditory processing disorders**

- May have no problem hearing, but they may not interpret and store words that are heard.
- May have a specific weakness in learning from sounds. These children may have even more difficulty when there's a lot of background noise.

Children with **ADHD**

- May have problems completing schoolwork or homework.
- May have problems remembering assignments.
- May have problems staying seated.
- May have problems staying focused or paying attention.
- May have problems remembering information.
- May become easily distracted.
- May have disruptive classroom behaviors.

Is there a cure?

There is no single cure for learning disabilities. 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 pediatrician. Also, you can contact trusted resources like the ones listed at the end of this brochure for more information.

Who can help?

Schools are required by law to help all children with language or learning difficulties at no cost to parents. If you're concerned about your child's problems with learning or think your child may have a learning disability, talk with your child's teacher and your pediatrician. Informal screening and formal evaluation are ways that teachers and other education specialists can help determine if there's a problem. Your pediatrician 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 that can help are psychologists and private educational specialists.

Children with learning disabilities may be eligible to receive special services to help them do well in school. These may include tutoring, non-timed tests, or sometimes changes in the classroom that are geared toward the child's specific learning style. One way to ensure that your child is being helped is for teachers and parents (and sometimes your pediatrician) 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 this plan is in place, it should be reviewed regularly to make sure your child's needs are being met.

Remember

Children with learning disabilities can learn and succeed, if they get the right help and support. Early identification is important—if you have any concerns about your child's learning, talk with your pediatrician.

If your child has ADHD, medicine may be recommended by your pediatrician or a specialist to improve your child's attention and concentration.

How can I help my child?

Most children who have problems learning can reach their goals by developing different ways of learning. Love and support from parents, friends, and teachers as well as the right medical care are important, too. Ways you can encourage 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.
- **Develop social skills.** Disabilities combined with the challenges of growing up can make your child sad, angry, or withdrawn. Help your child by pointing out that a learning disability is not tied to how smart he is. Try to find clubs, teams, and other activities that stress 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 learning disabilities 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.

Where can I find more information?

If you have any questions about learning disabilities, contact your pediatrician or any of the following resources:

American Academy of Pediatrics

National Center of Medical Home Initiatives for Children With Special Needs

847/434-4000
www.medicalhomeinfo.org

Children and Adults With Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD)

800/233-4050
www.chadd.org

Council for Exceptional Children

888/232-7733
www.cec.sped.org

Healthy & Ready to Work National Resource Center

www.hrtw.org

Learning Disabilities Association of America

888/300-6710
www.ldanatl.org

Learning Disabilities Worldwide

781/890-5399
www.ldworldwide.org

National Center for Learning Disabilities

888/575-7373

www.nclld.org

Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services

202/245-7468

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

Please note: Listing of resources does not imply an endorsement by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). The AAP is not responsible for the content of the resources mentioned in this publication. Phone numbers and Web site addresses are as current as possible, but may change at any time.

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.

From your doctor

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