

### Introduction

A learning disorder refers to a serious problem a student may have in learning how to read, write and do math or other learning activities. Learning disorders affect a child's ability to learn and process information. Learning disorder is sometimes called learning disability, learning difficulty or learning difference. Although learning disorders may exist in young children, they are usually not recognized until the child reaches the elementary level. In some students with high IQ, a learning disorder may not be noticed until later in schooling.



This reference summary explains learning disorders. It distinguishes them from mental and physical disabilities. It also discusses how to screen for a learning disorder and how to manage it.

### Learning Disorders

The human brain is capable of doing advanced mental skills such as speaking, reading, writing and doing math. These are advanced functions of the body that require billions of connections among the nerve cells of the brain. The brain has areas that specialize in vision, hearing and other sensory input. When some of these areas of the brain do not function correctly, a learning disorder may result.

A learning disorder is specific to a certain learning activity like reading, writing or doing math. Reading is the most common learning disorder.



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A learning disorder should be distinguished from normal differences between students. Students learn skills at different rates and some may do better than others in some subject areas. Students who perform below the average range in a certain subject area do not necessarily have a learning disorder. A learning disorder is when a student has a serious problem learning a subject area and is far below what you would expect from students his or her age.

There are many kinds of learning disorders. Most of the learning disorders professionals screen for are associated with the subjects taught at school, such as reading, writing and math. Learning disorders should not be confused with intellectual disorders. Intelligence is a broad measure of mental capabilities. But a learning disorder affects only one of these capabilities. For instance, a reading disorder is known as dyslexia. A person with dyslexia has intellectual skills that are in the average range or above, yet has problems reading.

Learning disorders are not the same as mental disabilities. A mental disability affects several mental capabilities while learning disorders only affect one or two aspects of learning. Learning disorders should also be distinguished from physical disabilities that may affect learning, such as being blind or deaf. Being blind or deaf affects learning and requires special education. But is not classified under learning disorders.



### **ADHD vs. Learning Disorders**

Learning disorders should not be confused with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD.

ADHD is a medical condition that affects many aspects of learning. The child or person may be inattentive, over-active, and may act impulsively. ADHD affects many areas of learning, while a learning disorder only affects one or two areas.

Children with ADHD may have one or more learning disorders. In any case, a specialized health care provider should evaluate the child. A child with a learning disorder should not be assumed to have ADHD without a diagnosis from a professional.

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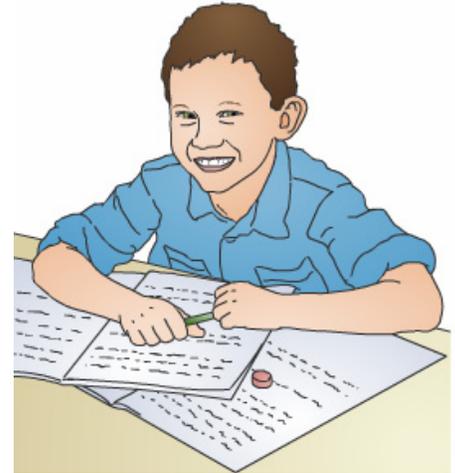
## Language Disorders

The following section briefly reviews some of the most common learning disorders related to reading and writing.

Language-related learning disorders are problems in speaking, listening, reading, spelling or writing. Children are expected to gain certain language skills at different developmental levels. If they don't learn certain skills by a certain age or grade level, then a language-related learning disorder may be the cause.

A reading disorder refers to a reading and language-based learning disorder. One common reading disorder is dyslexia. People with a reading disorder often have problems with:

- Learning to recognize and remember written words.
- Spelling words correctly.
- Writing.
- Understanding what they read.
- Associating sounds with letter symbols.



Dysgraphia is a learning disorder related specifically to handwriting. Unlike dyslexia, people with dysgraphia do not have trouble reading. Dysgraphia is often associated with delays in fine motor skills, such as the ability to form letters or stay between the lines when writing.

Dyscalculia is a learning disorder related to math. People with dyscalculia may have difficulty understanding math concepts. They may be unable to solve even simple math problems.

## Signs

The signs of a learning disorder depend on what type of learning difficulty the child has.

A serious delay in reaching certain developmental milestones when most other aspects of the child's development are normal could be a sign of a learning disorder. These delays may include problems with language, math, motor skills or other areas of learning. There are certain clues that you can look for to determine whether your child is struggling. Most of these tasks relate to elementary school. This is the time when most learning disorders are identified.

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Signs noticed in preschool age children include:

- Problems pronouncing words.
- Trouble finding the right word.
- Difficulty rhyming.
- Trouble learning the alphabet, numbers, colors, shapes or days of the week.
- Difficulty following directions or learning routines.
- Difficulty controlling crayons, pencils, and scissors or coloring within the lines.



A person with a learning disorder may struggle with the following skills:

- Learning the connection between letters and sounds.
- Blending sounds to make words.
- Pronouncing basic words when reading.
- Spelling words correctly and/or reading words correctly.
- Learning basic math concepts.
- Telling time and remembering sequences.

## Causes

It is difficult to identify the cause of a learning disorder. The brain is a complex organ and learning is a complex process. Many scientists believe that learning disorders are caused by small changes in the brain's structure and function.

There is some evidence suggesting that learning disorders are related to genetics. This is because learning disorders tend to run in families. They may be inherited from a parent.

Another possible cause of learning disorders has to do with a child's fetal development. Exposure to cigarettes, drugs or alcohol during pregnancy may increase the likelihood that the child will develop a learning disorder.

Children exposed to toxins like lead paint after they are born may develop a learning disorder.



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## Diagnosis

Usually, a team made up of an education consultant, a psychologist and classroom teachers assist in determining the presence of a learning disorder. This is the first step in developing an educational program that will help your child learn.

It is important to have someone specializing in the diagnosis of learning disorders do a full evaluation. The evaluation can tell the specialist if your child has a learning disorder or not. An evaluation for a learning disorder looks at how the student thinks, remembers, judges and behaves. Other factors related to development are also considered relative to the child's age.



An individual education evaluation is important for your child. It can identify your child's learning disorder. It also helps determine whether your child may be eligible for special education services. Several assessments may be used to determine an appropriate educational program for your child. Assessments measure your child's skills in specific areas. The assessment process may differ based on your school or state policies.

Other measures of your child's growth and development will also be taken. These measures may include classroom observations and interviews with parents, school staff and other adults who know your child. This provides useful information on how your child functions in different settings and circumstances. The professional needs to rule out other social causes of learning problems such as family problems, malnutrition and sleep problems. Medical problems also need to be eliminated, such as depression and ADHD.

A child is diagnosed with a learning disorder if all of the following criteria are met:

- The child's ability to read, do math or write is far below what would be expected for his or her age, intelligence and grade level.
- The learning disability is confirmed by a professional using some type of assessment. This process may differ depending on your school or state policies.
- The child's learning problems have a significant impact on school performance.

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## Treatment

There is no cure for a learning disorder. But there are special education techniques to help the child overcome the learning disorder and improve learning progress.

Special education often seeks to keep the child in his or her general classroom. Separating the child from regular classes is rarely recommended. Educators who have been specially trained may do regular educational evaluations to assess your child's academic and intellectual progress.



An evaluation may:

- Provide an Individual Education Plan, or IEP, that explains how your child's needs should be addressed at school.
- Determine what strategies will be most effective in helping your child learn.
- Measure the progress that has been made since the IEP was developed.

After the evaluation has been completed, the basic approach to treating your child's learning disorder is to teach certain academic skills. These skills are developed by building on your child's abilities and strengths. Weaknesses are also corrected and offset with other skills.

The early detection of learning disorders and the provision of special education has many advantages for the student. It helps the student learn as well as avoid becoming demoralized and frustrated, or lose interest in school.

## Summary

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The signs of a learning disorder depend on what type of learning difficulty the child has. A serious delay in reaching certain developmental milestones when most other aspects of the child's development are normal could be a sign of a learning disorder.

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