**Learning Disabilities: An Introduction for Parents**

When Sara was in the first grade, her teacher started teaching the students how to read. Sara's parents were really surprised when Sara had a lot of trouble. She was bright and eager, so they thought that reading would come easily to her. It didn't. She couldn't match the letters to their sounds or combine the letters to create words.

Sara's problems continued into second grade. She still wasn't reading, and she was having trouble with writing, too. The school asked Sara's mom for permission to evaluate Sara to find out what was causing her problems. Sara's mom gave permission for the evaluation.

The school conducted an evaluation and learned that Sara has a learning disability. She started getting special help in school right away.

Sara's still getting that special help. She works with a reading specialist and a resource room teacher every day. She's in the fourth grade now, and she's made real progress! She is working hard to bring her reading and writing up to grade level. With help from the school, she'll keep learning and doing well.1

**What is a learning disability?**

Some individuals, like Sara, despite having an average or above average intelligence, have real difficulty acquiring or using basic academic skills. These skills include those needed for successful reading, writing, listening, speaking and/or math. These difficulties might be the result of a learning disability (LD), a term which describes specific kinds of learning problems.

Many children with LD struggle with skills such as reading, writing, listening, speaking, reasoning, and solving math problems. As students get older and have to complete more advanced academic assignments, their learning disabilities may make it difficult to be fully successful in school.

Learning disabilities (LD) vary from person to person. One person with LD may not have the same kind of learning problems as another person with LD. For example, one person may have trouble reading and writing, while another has trouble understanding math. Still another person might have trouble in both areas.

Researchers think that learning disabilities are caused by differences in how a person's brain works and how it processes information. Children with learning disabilities are not "dumb" or "lazy." In fact, they usually have average or above average intelligence. Their brains just process information differently.2

**Can learning disabilities be cured?**

Learning disabilities are the result of a neurological difference in a person's brain, and so they cannot be "cured." They are a lifelong challenge, but they do not have to prevent a person from becoming successful in school and in their careers. With appropriate support, individuals with LD can learn how to manage their learning differences and achieve their goals throughout their lives.

**What are the types of learning disabilities?**

LD is a broad term. There are many different kinds of learning disabilities. Most often they fall into three broad categories:

* Reading disabilities (often referred to as [dyslexia](http://www.colorincolorado.org/article/12870))
* Written language disabilities (often referred to as [dysgraphia](http://www.ldonline.org/article/5613#dysgraphia))
* Math disabilities (often called [dyscalculia](http://www.ldonline.org/article/5613#dyscalculia))

Other related categories include disabilities that affect memory, social skills, and executive functions such as deciding to begin a task. (Learn more about the kinds of learning disabilities on [LDOnLine](http://www.ldonline.org).)

**How are learning disabilities identified?**

Usually, a teacher or parent notices that a child is struggling to learn or is behind in class. An evaluation can be requested by the teacher or the parent. A comprehensive set of tests is given to see why the child has difficulty. The earlier a child gets tested, the more likely it is that a child can overcome a learning disability.

It is important for children who are learning a second language to be evaluated in their native language when possible so that a professional can determine whether a child's difficulties are due to a learning disability and or a problem learning the second language. If a child is misdiagnosed, she may end up in the wrong kind of class — for example, she may be placed in a special education class when she needs more English instruction, or vice versa.

**What are the signs of a learning disability?**

Children learn in very different ways and at different rates. When a child has a language or reading problem, the reason might be simple to understand and deal with, or it might be complicated and require expert help. Often, children may just need more time to develop their language skills, and it is natural for children to experience some ups and downs in their learning patterns.

There is no one sign that shows that a person has a learning disability, but there are some signs and patterns that may indicate a learning disability if your child exhibits them frequently and/or over an extended period of time. A child probably won't show all or even most of these signs, but if your child shows a number of these signs, parents and teachers should consider having the child evaluated for a learning disability. These signs3 include:

**In Preschool**

* Trouble understanding what is being said
* Delay in speech development
* Slow vocabulary growth
* Difficulty in learning numbers alphabet, days of the week, colors, and shapes
* Difficulty with rhyming words
* Poor coordination and uneven motor development, such as delays in learning to sit, walk, color, or use scissors
* Difficulty following directions or routines
* Frequent restlessness and distraction
* Trouble interacting with peers

**In Elementary School**

* Problems connecting letters and sounds
* Problems forming letters and numbers
* Difficulty understanding what she reads
* Many mistakes when reading aloud, and frequent pauses
* Problems with basic spelling and grammar
* Makes consistent reading and spelling errors including letter reversals (b/d), inversions (m/w), transpositions (felt/left), and substitutions (house/home)
* Transposes number sequences and confuses arithmetic signs (+, -, x, /, =)
* Difficulties learning math skills and doing math calculations
* Difficulty with remembering facts
* Difficulty losing, forgetting, or organizing materials (notebook, binder, papers), information, and/or concepts
* Difficulty understanding oral instructions and or expressing oneself verbally
* Difficulty learning about time
* Difficulty gripping a pencil and very messy handwriting
* Poor coordination, frequent accidents
* Trouble following directions/li>

**In Middle or High School**

Some types of LD are not apparent until middle school or high school. With increased responsibilities and more complex work, students may avoid using certain skills and new areas of weakness may become apparent such as:

* Difficulty with spelling and letter sequence (left / felt)
* Trouble with handwriting and pencil grip
* Difficulty with grade-level reading comprehension, written language or math skills
* Difficulty planning time and assignments, especially long-term assignments with multiple parts
* Difficulty understanding discussions or expressing thoughts when speaking
* Trouble interacting with peers and making friends
* Difficulty organizing personal space and school materials
* Difficulty organizing thoughts when writing or speaking
* Avoids reading tasks, reading out loud or writing assignments
* Trouble adjusting to new settings

**More information**

If you think your child might have a learning disability, don't despair! There is a lot of information and support available, and there are many steps you can take to ensure that your child gets evaluated appropriately.

Take a look at the following articles and websites:

* [Do you suspect that your child has a reading difficulty or learning disability?](http://www.colorincolorado.org/article/27676)
* [10 Steps for Parents: If Your Child Has a Learning Disability](http://www.colorincolorado.org/article/27972)
* [LDOnLine](http://www.ldonline.org)
* [LD OnLine's Resource Page](http://www.ldonline.org/ldbasics/info)
* [National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (NICHCY)](http://www.nichcy.org/Pages/Home.aspx)
* [National Center for Learning Disabilities](http://www.ncld.org/)

**References**

References
This information has been adapted from the following sources:
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http://www.nichcy.org/InformationResources/Documents/NICHCY%20PUBS/fs7.pdf

The Coordinated Campaign for Learning Disabilities. Taking the First Step: A Guide for Parents of Children with Learning Disabilities.

U.S. Department of Education. Helping Your Child Become a Reader: If You Think There's a Problem. First published in September 2000.
Revised 2002 and 2005.
http://www.ed.gov/parents/academic/help/reader/part7.html

**Endnotes**

1Excerpt from NICHCY Disability Fact Sheet #7. 2004.

1NICHCY. 2004.

3This list of signs is adapted from "Taking the First Step: A Guide for Parents of Children with Learning Disabilities." The Guide was written by the Coordinated Campaign for Learning Disabilities, which was a collaborative public awareness effort supported by the Emily Hall Tremaine Foundation.

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