

Learning disabilities: does my child need special help with learning?

By Eileen Davalaar Ph.D., C. Psych

Some parents anticipate report cards with more anxiety than others. Is my grade one child taking longer to learn to read than others? Why can't my grade two child remember any number facts? Why is my seven-year-old so clumsy? Why can't my five-year-old sit still during story time? Could it be that my child has a learning problem? What is a "learning disability" anyway, and how would I find out if my child needs specific help?

These are normal questions that many parents ask, but for the most part their anxiety is unwarranted, and their children progress through school without further difficulty. For a small proportion of children, however, this anxiety is indeed justified. These are the children who are coping with a learning disability. So, what exactly does this term mean?

What are learning disabilities?

The search for an appropriate definition has plagued specialists in this field from the beginning. Currently, however, there is an emerging consensus that learning disabilities may be defined as "a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual, presumed to be due to central nervous dysfunction, and may occur across the life span" (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 1988). These disorders can significantly affect the way the young learner interprets and understands what he or she sees and hears, thereby affecting school work in the area of reading, writing, and mathematics. Other aspects of a child's daily life may also be affected. For example, a child may have difficulty understanding and remembering complex instructions, or have difficulty with verbal expressions, and such difficulties can create stresses within the family, as well as academically. A child's social interactions with friends may become a concern. Frequently, the child's self-confidence and self-esteem drop as he or she continues to experience failure and frustration. Many of these children, if not correctly diagnosed at an early stage in their academic careers, are in danger of leaving school prematurely and/or developing a negative attitude to learning.

What can parents do?

So how can you as parents discover whether the difficulties your child is having are related to a learning disability? Often, parents will have been aware that their child's development has been different from other children. You may have noted that your child cried excessively, did not respond easily to changes in routine, experienced great difficulty learning songs and rhymes, had trouble learning to skip or bounce a ball, had trouble learning

sequences like the days of the week or months of the year, or exhibited impulsive behaviour that may have resulted in injuries to himself or to others. While all children demonstrate some of these behaviours to some degree during their childhood, if a number of these persist into early school years, a learning disability may be present. Often, however, a disability may be subtle and the

symptoms may not appear until the child begins formal learning. If this is the case, the parents and teachers typically describe the child as a child who is "not living up to his or her potential." That is, the child appears to be intellectually capable, but is not making the expected academic progress.

If you suspect a learning problem, a carefully planned assessment may be required. An assessment involves gathering information from a variety of sources about the nature of the child's learning difficulties, and using this information to plan how to improve the child's learning environment. These sources include information from: the child, parents, teachers, school records, and the use of formal standardized testing procedures.

Professionals who have had considerable training in the use and interpretation of these tests generally perform formal testing.

This person may be a school professional, or a psychologist who is in private practice. A typical assessment would include a measure of the child's general intellectual ability (an IQ test), an achievement test indicating the level of formal schooling the child has reached in reading, spelling and mathematical reasoning, as well as a variety of measures chosen to investigate the child's specific problem. So, for example, a child who is experiencing difficulty in learning mathematical concepts will be given different tests than a child who is having difficulty learning to read, or a child who has problems producing and understanding language.

All this information is then compiled into a written report which profiles the child's learning strengths and weaknesses, and which includes a number of recommendations for parents and teachers to help improve the child's learning abilities. If the school did the assessment, you should be sure to receive a copy of the report for your own records.

It is vitally important that parents be involved throughout the assessment procedure. You are the ones who will continue to be involved in your child's schooling year after year. You need to understand the nature of the learning difficulties so that you can continue to seek the most effective help for your child over the years.

Eileen Davalaar has both an academic and applied background in cognitive psychology, with a focus on the assessment of reading and other developmental language disorders.

