

# Learning Disabilities

If your child is having difficulties in learning to read, write, spell or calculate, it doesn't mean that he or she is not intelligent. The problem may be a learning disability. According to the U.S. Department of Education, more than one in six children (17.5 percent) will encounter a problem learning to read during the first three years in school. Currently, 2.8 million students are receiving special education services for learning disabilities in U.S. public schools.

## What is a learning disability?

Learning disabilities refer to a number of disorders that may affect a person's ability to acquire, understand, organize, store or use verbal or non-verbal information. These disorders affect learning in individuals who generally have average or higher than average intelligence. They affect both children and adults, and seem to be more common in boys than girls. There are many reasons why children may not be able to learn. Learning disabilities are **not** the same as mental retardation, poor motivation, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD), autism, hearing, vision or emotional problems.

## What causes learning disabilities?

Although in many cases we don't know exactly what causes learning disabilities, experts believe that these difficulties are the result of abnormalities in the structure and function of the brain or central nervous system. Some factors that may influence or cause these abnormalities are:

- **Inheritance or genetics.** Learning disabilities tend to run in families.
- **Problems during pregnancy and child birth.** Illness or injury during or before birth, use of drugs or alcohol during pregnancy, premature or prolonged labor, lack of oxygen or low birth weight can contribute to learning disabilities.

- **Incidents after birth.** Some learning disabilities may be caused by head injuries, poor nutrition, lead poisoning and child abuse.

## What are the early warning signs?

While early attention and careful observation can make a difference in recognizing a problem and ensuring the best possible outcome, parents and educators should not make quick judgments. It's important to be aware of the potential risk of mislabeling a child as having a learning disability. A careful evaluation by the school and if necessary a developmental specialist will help insure a proper diagnosis. This will help the child obtain the services or assistance needed to support his or her ability to learn and maintain a healthy self-esteem.

Learning disabilities range in severity and may affect one or more of the following areas:

- **Language:** Difficulty in learning oral language (listening, speaking, understanding); reading (phonetic knowledge, word recognition, comprehension); written language (spelling, written expression); and mathematics (computation, problem solving).
- **Motor:** Difficulty in manipulating small objects, poor balance, poor sense of personal space, and awkwardness with jumping, running or climbing.
- **Social:** Difficulty in social interactions, sudden and extreme mood change, frequent crying.
- **Cognitive:** Difficulty in understanding cause and effect, basic concepts of size, shape, colors, and poor organizational skills.

If you suspect your child has a learning disability, contact your health care provider to find out if the proper developmental milestones are being met. Children who are considered to be at risk, or suspected of having learning disabilities, need to be evaluated by a multi-disciplinary team including educators, psychologists and physicians. Such evaluation can be arranged through the public school system at no cost to the family.

## Treating learning disabilities

Each child's needs are different, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that all children with learning disabilities have the right to free public education that meets their special needs. The management of a child with learning disabilities requires an individualized, multi-disciplinary approach for diagnosis and treatment.

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Provided by California Childcare Health Program  
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