

Characteristics of children with learning disabilities

Children with learning disabilities may display some of the following characteristics:

- early language delays and problems with sounds, letters and rhymes
- a tendency to be easily distracted and less focused than other students
- a reluctance to engage in learning, and a lack of internal motivation for academic pursuits
- an apparent lack of ability to think things through
- difficulty in transferring and generalising from one task to another
- slowness to start and difficulty in the completion of set tasks
- ongoing difficulty with reading, writing and/or mathematics
- persistent use of immature strategies, such as counting on fingers or guessing an unknown word based on the first sound
- an unwillingness to read for pleasure and/or participate in competitive maths games
- a preference for 'hands-on' tasks and activities such as sports, physical education, drawing, art and craft, etc.
- an inclination to rush, produce sloppy written work, or say the task is 'boring' or 'too easy/hard
- difficulty in remembering days, dates, names, telephone numbers, etc.
- difficulty in completing tests and finishing homework on time
- a greater reluctance to seek teacher support than other students
- an appearance be a passive learner who is inclined to daydream
- an inclination to call out and fail to take turns

- a lack of self-esteem and the tendency to follow the lead of others
- a specific learning disability, for example, with reading or understanding the meaning of what is read; or with maths, such as mastering a sense of numbers, number facts, calculations or mathematical reasoning.

While children with learning disabilities typically have average or above average thinking and reasoning abilities (i.e. intellectual ability), they have difficulties processing and retaining complex ideas, resulting in significantly lower academic achievement.

By the end of primary school, these children may be up to two or more years behind their peers and unprepared for traditional secondary schooling.

Types of learning disabilities

There are many types of learning disabilities and several can coexist. The following are some common specific learning disabilities.

- **Dyslexia.** A reading disability causes problems with phonemic awareness and fluency. Children with dyslexia have difficulty decoding words and reading aloud fluently, difficulty with working memory and often exhibit slow processing speed. A psychologist usually diagnoses dyslexia after a child meets a number of criteria, including being well below the expected reading level for their age.
- **Visual processing disorder.** Difficulty processing visual symbols such as letters and numbers.
- **Auditory processing disorder.** Difficulty processing speech and sounds. These children do not have trouble with hearing rather they have difficulty making sense of what they have heard.

- Dyspraxia. Difficulties in motor coordination of oral skills (such as making sounds), verbal skills (the creation of speech because of issues with coordination of lips and tongue), or simple and complex motor skills (difficulties with fine and/or gross motor control).
- Dysgraphia. A writing disability causes difficulties with written language, including handwriting and setting out written information on the page.
- Dyscalculia. A mathematics disability causes significant difficulties in mastering a sense of numbers, grasping and understanding the size or quantity of numbers, learning number facts, performing calculations and/or demonstrating mathematical reasoning.
- Non-verbal learning disorder/disability. Difficulties processing and interpreting visual and/or spatial information. These children tend to explore and mediate the world verbally, with a broad range of non-verbal deficits. They have difficulties with most areas of learning involving right hemisphere thinking, motor coordination, social interactions, peer relations, self-esteem, comprehension and personal organisation. This disability is often underdiagnosed.
- Severe language disorder. A communication disorder that leads to difficulty understanding, using and processing language. There are two general types of language disorders: expressive and receptive. Children with expressive language difficulties have problems conveying what they want to say using words. Children with receptive language difficulties have trouble processing and understanding what people say. Almost all children with receptive language difficulties also have expressive language difficulties.
- Attention and concentration difficulties. Attentional issues associated with conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) can lead to a

lack of ability to concentrate, sit alertly and remain task-focused. Attention and concentration difficulties may also be associated with lack of sleep, chronic tiredness, on-going trauma and emotional issues however, according to clinical guidelines, psychosocial adversity cannot account for learning disabilities.

- Pervasive developmental disorders impair or limit learning. The use of one-sided language, deficits in social-emotional reciprocity and restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities as associated with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) can lead to learning difficulties and issues with everyday functioning, depending on the severity of the condition, the child's developmental level and age.

Information processing problems and learning disabilities

- Working memory difficulties. Children with working memory problems have a reduced capacity to hold information in their mind for a brief period, and simultaneously process it. This can lead to difficulty in carrying out multi-step activities, following or repeating lengthy instructions, or correctly performing mental arithmetic. Working memory difficulties are often associated with poor phonological processing, learning disabilities, attentional issues, anxiety, worry and trauma.
- Poor processing speed. Difficulty in quickly performing automatic, routine cognitive tasks particularly when required to maintain focused concentration. Poor processing speed may affect perceptual speed (motor speed, copying ability, visual discrimination), number facility, rate of test taking, and speed of

reasoning.[6] A lack of ability to process information as quickly as one's peers can lead to learning, academic and social difficulties.

Learning disabilities and anxiety

Children with a learning disability often experience higher levels of anxiety than their peers, because of the daily difficulties they face in processing information and acquiring basic skills that are essential for learning. They can also be very tired at the end of the day as a result of the extra effort they need to exert in order to learn. Coupled with anxiety, tiredness can have a further negative impact on the child's ability to perform academically. Children with learning disabilities frequently feel anxious about:

- not being able to keep up with the class
- being different from other children
- feeling 'dumb' or 'stupid'
- the need to work harder to achieve the same or lesser outcomes than their peers.

Symptoms of anxiety

Children with learning disabilities might express anxiety through:

- avoidance strategies, such as talking to other students, asking to go to the toilet, etc.
- making excuses for not doing work
- oppositional behaviours, such as arguing, getting into fights, and general non-compliance
- withdrawing from others
- school refusal
- nightmares
- headaches, stomach aches, and other somatic complaints
- a decreased academic ability
- not remembering instructions
- 'going blank' or 'zoning out'
- frequently being the 'class clown' or saying the task is 'boring'.

Causes of learning disabilities

Learning disabilities arise because of impaired processing of visual information such as images, writing, and numbers; and auditory information such as language and other sounds. They are neurologically based; children with learning disabilities exhibit differences in brain function or structure when compared with their peers. While their causes are not completely understood, there is high heritability for some learning disabilities. Other known causes include problems experienced during pregnancy or birth; damage acquired after birth through issues such as malnutrition; exposure to certain chemicals; childhood illness; a major accident or ongoing trauma.

How are learning disabilities formally diagnosed?

In order to diagnose children with learning disabilities, a psychologist with appropriate expertise and experience observes the child and administers standardised tests of intelligence and achievement, and other psychosocial and clinical assessments. The outcomes of these assessments are examined in relation to same-age peers.

A formal diagnosis is often delayed, as the assessment criteria require the child's academic skills to be *substantially and quantifiably below* the level expected for their age and level of intelligence, which implies they should be at school for a number of years before the assessment takes place. While they may co-exist with a learning disability, other potential reasons for the child's low level of academic achievement (such as an intellectual disability, uncorrected sensory acuity, other mental or neurological disabilities, psychosocial adversity, language learning difficulties, or inadequate teacher instruction) must be ruled out during the diagnostic process. [7]

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