Learning Disabilities

Sara’s Story

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.

What are Learning Disabilities?

Learning disability is a general term that describes specific kinds of learning problems. A learning disability can cause a person to have trouble learning and using certain skills. The skills most often affected are: reading, writing, listening, speaking, reasoning, and doing math.

“Learning disabilities” is not the only term used to describe these difficulties. Others include:

- dyslexia—which refers to difficulties in reading;
- dysgraphia—which refers to difficulties in writing; and
- dyscalculia—which refers to difficulties in math.

All of these are considered learning disabilities.

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. Sara, in our example above, has trouble with reading and writing. Another person with LD may have problems with understanding math. Still another person may have trouble in both of these areas, as well as with understanding what people are saying.

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.
There is no “cure” for learning disabilities. They are life-long. However, children with LD can be high achievers and can be taught ways to get around the learning disability. With the right help, children with LD can and do learn successfully.

How Common are Learning Disabilities?

Very common! As many as 1 out of every 5 people in the United States has a learning disability. Almost 1 million children (ages 6 through 21) have some form of a learning disability and receive special education in school. In fact, one-third of all children who receive special education have a learning disability (Twenty-Ninth Annual Report to Congress, U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

What Are the Signs of a Learning Disability?

While there is no one “sign” that a person has a learning disability, there are certain clues. We’ve listed a few below. Most relate to elementary school tasks, because learning disabilities tend to be identified in elementary school. This is because school focuses on the very things that may be difficult for the child—reading, writing, math, listening, speaking, reasoning. A child probably won’t show all of these signs, or even most of them. However, if a child shows a number of these problems, then parents and the teacher should consider the possibility that the child has a learning disability.

When a child has a learning disability, he or she:

- may have trouble learning the alphabet, rhyming words, or connecting letters to their sounds;
- may make many mistakes when reading aloud, and repeat and pause often;
- may not understand what he or she reads;
- may have real trouble with spelling;
- may have very messy handwriting or hold a pencil awkwardly;
- may struggle to express ideas in writing;
- may learn language late and have a limited vocabulary;
- may have trouble remembering the sounds that letters make or hearing slight differences between words;
- may have trouble understanding jokes, comic strips, and sarcasm;
- may have trouble following directions;
- may mispronounce words or use a wrong word that sounds similar;
- may have trouble organizing what he or she wants to say or not be able to think of the word he or she needs for writing or conversation;
- may not follow the social rules of conversation, such as taking turns, and may stand too close to the listener;
- may confuse math symbols and misread numbers;
- may not be able to retell a story in order (what happened first, second, third); or
- may not know where to begin a task or how to go on from there.

If a child has unexpected problems learning to read, write, listen, speak, or do math, then teachers and parents may want to investigate more. The same is true if the child is struggling to do any one of these skills. The child may need to be evaluated to see if he or she has a learning disability.

About the Evaluation Process

If you are concerned that your child may have a learning disability, contact his or her school and request that the school conduct an individualized evaluation under IDEA (the nation’s special education law) to see if, in fact, a learning disability is causing your child difficulties in school. Visit NICHCY’s website and read more about the evaluation process, beginning at: http://nichcy.org/schoolage/evaluation/
What if the School System Declines to Evaluate Your Child?

If the school doesn’t think that your child’s learning problems are caused by a learning disability, it may decline to evaluate your child. If this happens, there are specific actions you can take. These include:

- **Contact your state’s Parent Training and Information Center (PTI) for assistance.** The PTI can offer you guidance and support in what to do next. Find your PTI by visiting: http://www.parentcenternetwork.org/parentcenterlisting.html

- **Consider having your child evaluated by an independent evaluator.** You may have to pay for this evaluation, or you can ask that the school pay for it. To learn more about independent evaluations, visit NICHCY at: http://nichcy.org/schoolage/parental-rights/iee

- **Ask for mediation, or use one of IDEA’s other dispute resolution options.** Parents have the right to disagree with the school’s decision not to evaluate their child and be heard. To find out more about dispute resolution options, visit NICHCY at: http://nichcy.org/schoolage/disputes/overview

### IDEA’s Definition of LD

Not surprisingly, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) includes a definition of “specific learning disability.” We’ve presented this in the box below. IDEA also lists evaluation procedures that must be used at a minimum to identify and document that a child has a specific learning disability. These will now be discussed in brief.

#### Additional Evaluation Procedures for LD

Now for the confusing part! The ways in which children are identified as having a learning disability have changed over the years. Until recently, the most common approach was to use a “severe discrepancy” formula. This referred to the gap, or discrepancy, between the child’s intelligence or aptitude and his or her actual performance.

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**IDEA’s Definition of “Specific Learning Disability”**

The nation’s special education law specifically defines the term “specific learning disability,” as follows:

(10) **Specific learning disability — (i) General.** Specific learning disability means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia.

(ii) **Disorders not included.** Specific learning disability does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.

34 CFR §300.8(c)(10)
• must permit local educa-
tional agencies (LEAs) to
use a process based on the
child’s response to scient-
ific, research-based inter-
vention; and

• may permit the use of other
alternative research-based
procedures for determining
whether a child has a
specific learning disability.

Basically, what this means is
that, instead of using a severe
discrepancy approach to deter-
mining LD, school systems may
provide the student with a
research-based intervention and
keep close track of the student’s
performance. Analyzing the
student’s response to that
intervention (RTI) may then be
considered by school districts in
the process of identifying that a
child has a learning disability.

There are also other aspects
required when evaluating
children for LD. These include
observing the student in his or
her learning environment
(including the regular education
setting) to document academic
performance and behavior in
the areas of difficulty.

This entire fact sheet could
be devoted to what IDEA
requires when children are
evaluated for a learning disabil-
ity. Instead, let us refer you to a
training module on the subject.
It’s quite detailed, but if you
would like to know those
details, read through Module 11
of NICHCY’s Building the Legacy
curriculum on IDEA 2004. It’s
available online, at: http://nichcy.org/laws/idea/legacy/module11

Moving on, let us suppose
that the student has been
diagnosed with a specific
learning disability. What next?

What About School?

Once a child is evaluated
and found eligible for special
education and related services,
school staff and parents meet
and develop what is known as
an Individualized Education
Program, or IEP. This docu-
ment is very important in the
educational life of a child with
learning disabilities. It describes
the child’s needs and the
services that the public school
system will provide free of
charge to address those needs.
Learn more about the IEP, what
it includes, and how it is devel-
oped, at: http://nichcy.org/schoolage/iep

Supports or changes in the
classroom (called accommo-
dations) help most students with
LD. Common accommoda-
tions are listed in the “Tips for
Teachers” box on the next page.
Accessible instructional materi-
als (AIM) are among the most
helpful to students whose LD
affects their ability to read and
process printed language.
Thanks to IDEA 2004, there are
numerous places to turn now
for AIMS. We’ve listed one
central source in “Resources
Especially for Teachers” on the
next page.

Assistive technology can also
help many students work
around their learning disabili-
ties. Assistive technology can
range from “low-tech” equip-
ment such as tape recorders to
“high-tech” tools such as
reading machines (which read
books aloud) and voice recogni-
tion systems (which allow the
student to “write” by talking to
the computer). To learn more
about AT for students who have
learning disabilities, visit LD
Online’s Technology section, at:
http://www.ldonline.org/indepth/technology

What About Home?

A child with learning
disabilities may need help at
home as well as in school.
Some suggestions are given in
under “Tips for Parents” (see
page 6) where you’ll find other
relevant items listed, too.

Conclusion

Learning disabilities clearly
affect some of the key skills in
life—reading, writing, doing
math. Because many people
have learning disabilities, there
is a great deal of expertise and
support available. Take advan-
tage of the many organizations
focused on LD. Their materials
and their work are intended
solely to help families, students,
educators, and others under-
stand LD and address it in ways
that have long-lasting impact.

NICHCY: http://nichcy.org
Tips for Teachers

Learn as much as you can about the different types of LD. The resources and organizations listed below can help you identify specific techniques and strategies to support the student educationally.

Seize the opportunity to make an enormous difference in this student’s life! Find out and emphasize what the student’s strengths and interests are. Give the student positive feedback and lots of opportunities for practice.

Provide instruction and accommodations to address the student’s special needs. Examples:

- breaking tasks into smaller steps, and giving directions verbally and in writing;
- giving the student more time to finish schoolwork or take tests;
- letting the student with reading problems use instructional materials that are accessible to those with print disabilities;
- letting the student with listening difficulties borrow notes from a classmate or use a tape recorder; and
- letting the student with writing difficulties use a computer with specialized software that spell checks, grammar checks, or recognizes speech.

Learn about the different testing modifications that can really help a student with LD show what he or she has learned.

Teach organizational skills, study skills, and learning strategies. These help all students but are particularly helpful to those with LD.

Work with the student’s parents to create an IEP tailored to meet the student’s needs.

Establish a positive working relationship with the student’s parents. Through regular communication, exchange information about the student’s progress at school.

Resources Especially for Teachers

LD Online | For Educators
http://www.ldonline.org/educators

LD Online | Teaching and Instruction
http://www.ldonline.org/indepth/teaching

National Center for Learning Disabilities | Especially for Teachers
http://www.ncld.org/at-school/especially-for-teachers

TeachingLD | A service of the Division for Learning Disabilities (DLD) of the Council for Exceptional Children
http://teachingld.org/

Learning Disabilities Association of America | For Teachers
http://www.ldanatl.org/aboutld/teachers/index.asp

National Center for Accessible Instructional Materials | Find AIM in your state!
http://aim.cast.org/

Reading Rockets | For Teachers
http://www.readingrockets.org/audience/teachers
**Tips for Parents**

Learn about LD. The more you know, the more you can help yourself and your child.

Praise your child when he or she does well. Children with LD are often very good at a variety of things. Find out what your child really enjoys doing, such as dancing, playing soccer, or working with computers. Give your child plenty of opportunities to pursue his or her strengths and talents.

Find out the ways your child learns best. Does he or she learn by hands-on practice, looking, or listening? Help your child learn through his or her areas of strength.

Let your son or daughter help with household chores. These can build self-confidence and concrete skills. Keep instructions simple, break down tasks into smaller steps, and reward your child’s efforts with praise.

Make homework a priority. Read more about how to help your child be a success at homework in the resources listed below.

Pay attention to your child’s mental health (and your own!). Be open to counseling, which can help your child deal with frustration, feel better about himself or herself, and learn more about social skills.

Talk to other parents whose children have LD. Parents can share practical advice and emotional support. You can identify parent groups in your area via NICHCY’s State Resource Sheets. Go to the section entitled "Disability-Specific Agencies" and scroll down until you reach "learning disabilities."

Meet with school personnel and help develop an IEP to address your child’s needs. Plan what accommodations your child needs, and don’t forget to talk about AIM or assistive technology!

Establish a positive working relationship with your child’s teacher. Through regular communication, exchange information about your child’s progress at home and at school.

**Resources Especially for Parents**

LD Online | For Parents  
http://www.ldonline.org/parents

LD Online | Parenting and Family  
http://www.ldonline.org/indepth/parenting

National Center for Learning Disabilities | In the Home  
http://www.ncld.org/in-the-home

Learning Disabilities Association of America | For Parents  
http://www.ldanatl.org/aboutld/parents/index.asp

Reading Rockets | For Parents  
http://www.readingrockets.org/audience/parents

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