Learning Disabilities

A learning disability is a nervous system problem that interferes with a person's ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or do math calculations. It does not include learning problems due to vision, hearing, emotional or intelligence issues. Attention span (ability to focus), memory, muscle coordination and behavior can also be affected.

Common learning disabilities include:

- Dyslexia – causes trouble with language skills, especially reading.
- Dysgraphia – a problem with writing letters or expressing ideas in written form.
- Dyscalculia – causes difficulty with math problems and concepts.

A learning disability does not mean low intelligence (*not smart*). Attention span problems, such as Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) may happen at the same time. Learning disabilities are a lifelong problem.

CAUSES

At this time, all of the causes of a learning disability are not known. Current research suggests that brain structure and function may play a role. Learning disabilities often run in families.

SYMPTOMS

Symptoms of learning disability depend on the child's age and the type of disability they have.

- Preschool signs:
  - Troubles with producing speech (*pronunciation*).
  - Problems learning numbers, letters, colors, shapes, etc.
  - Tough time interacting with friends.
  - Trouble with buttoning and zipping.
  - Hard time controlling pencils, crayons or scissors.
  - Hard time with concentration.
- Early elementary school signs:
  - Problems with basic words.
  - Problems learning time.
  - Problems with remembering facts.
  - Letter reversals when reading or spelling.
  - Problems with the sounds of letters.
  - Trouble learning new math skills.
  - Not wanting to do home work.
  - Not organized.
  - Messy handwriting that is hard to read.
- Later elementary school and junior high signs:
  - Problems with understanding what was read.
  - Problems with math skills.
  - Disorganized papers, desk and notebook.
  - Spelling problems.
  - Late assignments.
  - Messy handwriting that is hard to read.
  - Trouble with understanding out loud (*oral*) discussions and expressing thoughts out loud.
- High School signs:
  - Slow getting work done or reading.
  - Problems with abstract concepts.
  - Misreading instructions or information.

- Problems with memory.
- Spelling issues.

Students with learning difficulties are often frustrated with school and embarrassed about their difficulties. There may be behavioral problems, depression or anxiety about school.

DIAGNOSIS

Diagnosis of learning disabilities is usually done by testing a child's abilities and intelligence. Learning disabled children do not have learning problems because they are not smart. Physical exams and other testing should rule out any clear physical problems.

TREATMENT

There is no cure for a learning disability. Best treatment is done early and throughout the child's school career. Finding the problem before third grade can often result in a child achieving grade levels. One-on-one, special teaching approaches are needed.

HOMECARE INSTRUCTIONS

Parents and teachers should meet often. This will help monitor the child's school performance. Meetings would also help ensure that approaches to the child are the same at home and at school. Parents need to insist that the child is getting all the help and special assistance available through the school. Tutoring is often helpful. Some methods that help at home are below.

- Take many breaks when doing homework.
- Adjust how you work with your child according to his or her primary learning style.
- Use computers for written assignments.
- Show organization skills by making lists and prioritizing work.
- Help your child keep their workspace, schoolwork and room organized.
- Play games of strategy.
- Focus on your child's strengths.
- Give your child opportunity for success in activities they enjoy and do well in.
- Praise your child often for positive work qualities.
- Discuss current events and ideas.
- Work on strategies for solving problems with classmates and friends.

Support groups are helpful. Talking with other parents is a good way to better understand what works with children and teachers when dealing with learning disabilities.

Document Released: 12/08/2003 Document Re-Released: 03/26/2009
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