

Learning Disabilities: Helping Handout for Home

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INTRODUCTION

Learning disabilities are the most common educational disability, affecting approximately 5% to 10% of all children in schools. Learning disabilities are characterized by severe difficulties in reading, math, writing, or language skills that are believed to be caused by differences in how the brain processes information. There is no one defining characteristic of learning disabilities, and children with learning disabilities exhibit a range of academic and behavioral difficulties.

If your child has severe difficulties with reading, math, writing, or language, he or she may be eligible for support through special education services under the educational category of learning disability (LD). In schools, the broad term *learning disabilities* is most commonly used because that is the term used in federal special education law, but you may also hear other professionals use the terms *dyslexia* to refer to a reading disability, *dyscalculia* to refer to a math disability, and *dysgraphia* to refer to a writing disability.

The International Dyslexia Association and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development defined dyslexia as a reading disability that is neurobiological in origin and characterized by difficulties with accurate or fluent word recognition, and by poor spelling and decoding skills (Lyon, Shaywitz, & Shaywitz, 2003). Reading difficulties associated with dyslexia are typically the result of a deficit in the phonological component of language, that is, the ability to hear and manipulate sounds in words. These difficulties are often unexpected in relation to the student's other cognitive abilities and persist even when the student has received effective instruction in the regular classroom. Although LD

substantially overlaps with dyslexia, dyscalculia, and dysgraphia, they are defined somewhat differently. So it is possible for a student to be diagnosed with dyslexia, dyscalculia, or dysgraphia but to not meet the criteria for LD in schools. For example, a student might have difficulties with decoding or word recognition but may have overall reading skills that fall within expectations for the student's grade and cognitive abilities. In this example, the student may be diagnosed with dyslexia by a physician or psychologist but may not meet the state criteria for LD and would not receive special education services.

Children with learning disabilities may exhibit some of the following characteristics during preschool and elementary school:

- Difficulty identifying sounds in words
- Difficulty rhyming words
- Difficulty learning letter names and sounds
- Trouble hearing sounds in words
- Difficulty learning math facts
- Slower completion of schoolwork than peers
- Difficulty remembering information
- Difficulty spelling
- Avoidance of reading

At the middle and high school level, the most prominent characteristics include the following:

- Slower completion of schoolwork than peers
- Difficulty remembering information
- Difficulty spelling
- Avoidance of reading
- Difficulty expressing ideas in writing
- Disorganization
- Difficulty understanding what is read

WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORTS

Interventions for students with LD are most effective when they focus directly on the core academic difficulty. Efforts to improve underlying cognitive processes such as working memory, visual processing, and executive function have not been effective. Similarly, matching instruction to a student's supposed learning style (visual, kinesthetic, or auditory) has not resulted in positive outcomes, so this approach should not be used (Kavale & Forness, 2000). The belief that learning styles hold the answer to reaching children with LD is a widespread educational myth that has persisted for decades, but it will not help your child better understand reading, mathematics, or writing. The method that has been most effective is giving explicit instruction in areas in which students with learning disabilities struggle, especially when implemented early in the child's development.

Reading disabilities are language-based disorders and not the result of problems with the eyes. This is why interventions that focus on enhancing visual processing (e.g., vision training or vision tracking) have not led to increased student learning (Helveston, 2005). Instead, interventions for learning disabilities in reading should focus on reading the words accurately and with sufficient speed, or on decoding skills (i.e., matching letters and letter combinations to their corresponding sounds to read new words), depending on student needs.

Students identified with a learning disability in math most frequently have deficits in (a) understanding numerical magnitude, that is, concepts such as *greater than* and *less than* and the number of objects represented by a written number; (b) recalling basic arithmetic facts (e.g., $4 \times 6 = 24$) from long-term memory; and (c) learning mathematical procedures, or the steps needed to solve mathematical problems (Geary, 2011). Interventions should focus on increasing accuracy, fluency, and generalization of those three core areas (magnitude, arithmetic facts, and mathematical procedures).

Students with writing disabilities have trouble planning their writing and are ineffective at revising their written work. They also show frequent errors in spelling, punctuation, and capitalization, and poor handwriting (Graham, Harris, & Larsen, 2001). Interventions should teach and provide considerable practice in planning and revising writing, and in the mechanics of writing, as needed for individual

students. However, given that writing is essentially the application of strategies, intervention plans should also include the Self-Regulated Strategy Development program to support students' use and monitoring of writing strategies (Harris, Graham, & Mason, 2003). Self-Regulated Strategy Development helps students focus on and value the use of writing strategies to compose written text by planning their writing, including all important pieces of information in their writing, and monitoring their writing. For example, students learn strategies to write narrative text (i.e., stories) by planning and then writing about the main idea, characters, and setting, and including a story beginning, middle, and end.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Students with LD benefit from early identification, systematic instruction, and social-emotional support for their academic challenges. Some of the interventions described below apply to students of all ages, whereas others are targeted to specific developmental levels.

For All Ages

The following are general strategies parents can use throughout their child's school life.

1. ***Talk to your child's teacher as soon as you notice difficulty learning.*** Share your observations of your child's difficulties with schoolwork and with reading, mathematics, writing, and language skills at home. Ask your child's teachers about their observations of these skills to see if difficulties are noticed both at home and at school.
2. ***Establish a routine for completing schoolwork.*** Children with learning disabilities may avoid completing schoolwork because they find it difficult. Having a routine for completing schoolwork at home can provide structure to minimize work avoidance. Have your child complete homework at the same time each afternoon or evening and in a space where there are minimal distractions.
3. ***Be an active partner in developing your child's Individualized Education Program (IEP).*** Children with learning disabilities receiving special education services will have an IEP. This document outlines your child's educational programming, including special education services, academic and behavioral goals, and classroom and testing accommodations.

Under federal law, you are a member of the IEP team. Talk with your child's special education teacher and school psychologist to make sure you are receiving all of the information you need to make decisions and actively participate in planning supports for your child.

4. **Reinforce at home the skills your child is learning at school.** Students with learning disabilities often have difficulty remembering information, so giving additional practice of skills at home can help with retention. Homework should include skills your child already knows but needs to practice. Talk to your child's teacher if homework is too challenging and results in frustration for your child.
5. **Emphasize that students with learning disabilities do learn.** Children and youth with learning disabilities recognize that learning is difficult. However, they should understand that it is not impossible and that they can influence their own learning, even though it takes extra effort and determination. Remind them that reading, math, and writing are skills that need to develop, not traits with which people are born, and that almost everyone struggles with learning new skills at some point in their lives.
6. **Support self-advocacy.** Self-advocacy is the ability to communicate one's needs to others to enhance learning and development. Help your child better understand his or her strengths, areas that are particularly difficult, and best ways to learn. Have your child practice communicating this information to others.

Preschool and Elementary Ages

The following strategies will benefit younger children by helping to build skills and habits they will use in school. Parents also will learn to effectively address problems they encounter.

7. **Support early school-based academic intervention.** Students with academic difficulties often benefit from early intervention in the area of difficulty. Intervening early (when difficulties are initially suspected) is often more effective than waiting for the student to "grow out of it." Work with school personnel regarding appropriate school support for your child. Your child's teacher can help you understand the process for getting extra help. You may want to talk to the school psychologist as well to plan specific interventions.

8. **Read frequently with your child.** Children with learning disabilities may avoid reading, but time spent practicing reading is important for increasing reading skills. Reading to your child is also helpful, because children with learning disabilities can benefit from hearing reading modeled. Make this reading time pleasant for your child by using the following strategies:
 - Allow your child to pick books (including graphic novels and magazines) so that he or she will be interested in reading practice.
 - Encourage your child to read to you, and help with difficult words if needed. Then, have your child reread any difficult words to practice reading the words correctly.
 - If your child is overwhelmed by having large amounts of text to read, alternate reading pages, paragraphs, or sentences with your child. Doing so can provide a reading model for your child while alleviating some of the stress of reading.
9. **Play rhyming games.** Children with learning disabilities may struggle with hearing and understanding the sounds within words. Rhyming games can provide additional practice with sound manipulation. For example, ask your child to tell you if two words rhyme or not: "Do cat and bat rhyme? Do cat and dog rhyme?" Once your child can identify when two words rhyme, include three words in the activity: "Which of these words rhyme? Cat, bat, and bike." Finally, say a word and ask your child to provide a rhyming word: "What word rhymes with cat?"
10. **Practice letter sounds.** Children with learning disabilities may have difficulty learning letter names and letter sounds. Provide additional practice at home using these activities:
 - a. Orally practice letter names and sounds by asking your child to state the letter that makes a specific sound (e.g., /b/). You can also provide the letter and ask the child to say the sound that letter makes.
 - b. Make a game of practicing letter names and letter sounds by having your child state letter names and sounds that are encountered frequently. For example, ask your child to state the first letter name or sound of street and store signs while driving or of foods found at the grocery store.
11. **Practice math facts.** One of the hallmarks of learning disabilities in math is an inability to recall basic facts fast enough to use them. Daily

practice with math facts can provide support for more advanced skills. Flashcards provide great opportunities for practicing math facts (i.e., addition, subtraction, multiplication). Your child's teacher can help determine which facts your child should work on. When practicing math facts, avoid practicing too many new facts at once (typically two or three new facts at one time) and include facts your child already knows as you practice.

Middle School and High School

Strategies for middle and high school include continuing to practice earlier strategies and expanding to use technology and other tools.

1. **Continue to practice skills with which your child has difficulty.** Because children do not grow out of learning disabilities, they may have ongoing difficulty with sounding out words, remembering math facts and math operations, and spelling correctly and writing throughout adolescence. Daily practice with math facts may still be necessary for adolescent students. Flashcards may also help with sight words, suffixes and prefixes, and vocabulary words.
2. **Incorporate technology resources to support academic skills.** Technology can support learning in both math and reading. Consider the use of a calculator for performing basic math operations (i.e., addition, subtraction, multiplication, division) if these skills are difficult for your child. However, your child still needs to practice the math operations and procedures being taught, so talk to your child's math teacher about the appropriate use of a calculator. Similarly, talk to your child's teachers about options for access to audio versions of course textbooks to complement your child's reading. However, avoid relying solely on audio books to ensure that your child still practices reading skills.
3. **Practice vocabulary.** Many academic tasks have specific vocabulary associated with them. Work with your adolescent to identify important vocabulary for each task and practice the meanings of the vocabulary words on a frequent basis. It may be especially helpful to identify the vocabulary words before tasks are taught and practice the words beforehand.
4. **Use concept maps and graphic organizers at home.** Concept maps and graphic organizers are extremely useful resources to support reading comprehension, and many are available for

free online (e.g., www.lucidchart.com, <http://www.worksheetworks.com/miscellanea/graphic-organizers.html>). Parents can have their adolescents complete concept maps at home to support learning at school. For example, have your adolescent write important information on the concept map as it relates to homework texts. The student could draw or download a concept map about the three branches of government that represents a tree (labeled "government") with three branches on which the student would write the name and function of each branch of government (for an example, see <https://www.education.com/worksheet/article/branches-of-the-us-government/>). Students could also complete a map from memory each day as soon as they arrive home to remind themselves about what they learned that day in school. They could then look up missing pieces of information that they did not immediately recall.

5. **Use self-reflection with errors in math.** Examine homework with your adolescent, even after it is scored and returned. Emphasize that errors are opportunities to learn. Ask questions such as "What were you thinking as you completed this problem? What do you think about your strategy now? What else do you need to know so that you can complete similar problems correctly?"
6. **Seek supports at school as needed.** Many parents find high school-level work confusing or intimidating. You may find it very different from your own school experiences and may be concerned that you cannot help your adolescent. Talk with your adolescent's teacher or school psychologist about additional supports at school to help your child with homework. Many schools have after-school homework clubs or study support classes that may be beneficial.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Websites

<https://cehdvision2020.umn.edu/blog/helping-kids-with-reading/>

The Minnesota Center for Reading Research's webpage provides information about reading with your child at home.

<https://ldaamerica.org/parents/>

The Learning Disabilities Association of America provides resources for parents to better understand LD.

<http://www.ldonline.org/article/30521/>

This online article by Ania Siwek is about how to talk to children about LD.

<http://www.intensiveintervention.org/>

The National Center for Intensive Intervention provides information on data-based interventions and progression monitoring for students with severe academic and behavior needs.

<http://www.rti4success.org/>

The National Center on RTI provides information on response to intervention, including screening, progress monitoring, and intervention. This information will help you understand the supports being provided to your child.

<http://www.ldonline.org/about/partners/njclcd>

The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities provides information on relevant special education law, research-based information, and resources on learning disabilities.

<http://www.rtinetwork.org/>

The RTI Action Network includes an LD identification toolkit and instructional videos for RTI implementation.

Related Helping Handouts

Engagement and Motivation: Helping Handout for Home

Homework, Organization, and Study Skills: Helping Handout for Home

Reading Skills: Helping Handout for Home

Math Skills: Helping Handout for Home

School Readiness and School Entry: Helping Handout for Home

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