

Learning Disabilities – Emotional and Social Issues

By Margaret Thornton, M.Ed.

You are not alone if you are an adult with learning disabilities, a parent or teacher with a child with a learning disability, or someone who has a friend with learning differences. And if this title grabbed your eye, you are likely already tuned into the fact that the emotional and social aspects of learning disabilities are rarely confined to school or work. Self-confidence in handling daily situations, relationships with friends, non-academic or social functioning in sports and activities, and the role in the family can be areas of life that are affected.

Typical learning difficulties include dyslexia, dyscalculia, and dysgraphia – often complicated by associated disorders such as attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder or language processing problems. The aspect of learning disabilities that is an essential secondary aspect is their emotional fallout.

Individuals with learning disabilities may not learn as easily from experiences or social “cues” as their friends, may misinterpret the social behavior of others, and may be less observant in their social environment. Some children may exhibit an immaturity and social ineptness due to their learning disability. Sometimes their eagerness for friends causes them to try too hard and come across as awkward or inappropriate. With language processing problems, individuals may miss a joke or their timing in a bantering exchange may be delayed.

Unacknowledged or undiagnosed learning disabilities have a multitude of complications. Families and individuals may intuitively sense something is “off”; that they or their child think differently, or that despite disproportionate effort in school or work, there are only marginal results. In recently speaking with an adult whose Attention Deficit Disorder went undiagnosed until well into adulthood, she made the comment, “You know, it would be so much easier if people could *see* my ADD. They have no idea how hard I work to keep focused and fit in . . . and that’s with my medicine.” Despite this desire to be understood, there is frequently a simultaneous ambivalence to have peers or co-workers know that they have a learning disability because many people continue to misconstrue learning

issues as “mental retardation.” Children and adolescents with learning disabilities carry self-attributions into adulthood, such as “I can’t,” as opposed to “I can.” Such learned helplessness results in an individual feeling that if they do something well, it’s luck; if something goes wrong, they’re at fault or stupid.

The Learning Disabilities Association of America cites noted researcher and psychologist, Paul Gerber, Ph.D., who identifies several attributes of highly successful adults with Learning Disabilities. Looking at just a few attributes - desire, goal orientation, persistence, and social ecology - one can see how these attributes are both signposts and goals for emotional and social success. What should you look toward developing in a child so that their learning challenges can be integrated into a successful future?

It is easy to see how the attributes of desire, persistence, and goal orientation come to be associated with success. Even when your first grader comes to you with designs on being the next Tiger Woods or Justin Thomas, Louisville’s St. X junior golf phenom, but doesn’t have the innate eye/hand coordination that would predict success, fueling the importance of having a heart’s desire, helping the child find a path toward the goal, and encouraging their learning and practice is essential. Helping a child to learn their own best approach based on their learning style is helpful. There are a lot of kids who learn their spelling lists better if they sing them to maximize their auditory learning, or “write” the words in a dish of sand to utilize their stronger kinesthetic memory. If the child can’t practice reading or their sport for half an hour everyday, encourage 15 minutes of practice twice a day. It’s not just working toward a particular goal, but learning how to work toward goals in general that’s important.

Finding a social network of people who accept and support the person with learning disabilities is very important, as is finding a good match in the school or work environment. This goodness-of-fit is an important component to helping the person become self-accepting. Keeping a positive, accepting attitude as a friend, parent, teacher, or co-worker is like gold to anyone, particularly someone with an invisible disability. The demonstration of acceptance of and support for others’ nuances begets ongoing acceptance and support.

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