

Learning Disabilities: The Warning Signs

By Margaret Thornton, M.Ed.

Your child is bright, active, and from a good home, but at school you hear things like “Not living up to his potential,” or “Doesn’t apply herself.” Your child is intelligent and capable, but he or she is getting poor grades, and their self-esteem is starting to crumble. Your son may be having trouble with his peers, or your daughter may be uncoordinated or reclusive. You see your home becoming a daily battleground where you lecture, cajole, and threaten your child into doing their homework. It seems that even with your help, your child struggles to remember math facts or they avoid reading. It takes your son forever to complete an assignment and if he gets it done, he forgets to turn it in, or loses it. You and your spouse have endless discussions about what is wrong and what to do with your formerly happy child.

If any of this sounds familiar, you may be the parent of a child with a learning disability. Welcome to the club. According to a 2000 study by Columbia University, one in five children has some sort of learning and/or attention disorder, and you are just one of the millions of parents who are frustrated, tired, worried, and wondering how to help their child. Don’t despair.

Learning disabilities are neurologically-based disorders with the way the brain processes information. They are genetically based, just like blue eyes or flat feet; so you can stop blaming yourselves, your child, or the teachers, and get started on the road to academic success.

Although there is no cure for a learning disability, (also referred to as a learning difference) there are lots of things you can do to help your child succeed in school. *The key is early diagnosis and intervention.* Here is a brief list, from LD Online, of signs of a possible challenge.

Preschool

- Speaks later than most children
- Pronunciation problems
- Slow vocabulary growth, often unable to find the right word
- Difficulty rhyming words
- Trouble learning numbers, alphabet, days of the week, colors, shapes
- Extremely restless and easily distracted
- Trouble interacting with peers
- Difficulty following directions or routines
- Fine motor skills slow to develop

Grades K-4

- Slow to learn the connection between letters and sounds
- Confuses basic words (*run, eat, want*)
- Makes consistent reading and spelling errors including letter reversals (*b/d*), inversions (*m/w*), transpositions (*felt/left*), and substitutions (*house/home*)
- Transposes number sequences and confuses arithmetic signs (+, -, x, /, =)
- Slow to remember facts
- Slow to learn new skills, relies heavily on memorization
- Impulsive, difficulty planning
- Unstable pencil grip
- Trouble learning about time
- Poor coordination, unaware of physical surroundings, prone to accidents

Grades 5-8

- Reverses letter sequences (*soiled/solid, left/felt*)
- Slow to learn prefixes, suffixes, root words, and other spelling strategies
- Avoids reading aloud

- Trouble with word problems
- Difficulty with handwriting
- Awkward, fist-like, or tight pencil grip
- Avoids writing assignments
- Slow or poor recall of facts
- Difficulty making friends
- Trouble understanding body language and facial expressions

High School Students

- Continues to spell incorrectly, frequently spells the same word differently in a single piece of writing
- Avoids reading and writing tasks
- Trouble summarizing
- Trouble with open-ended questions on tests
- Weak memory skills
- Difficulty adjusting to new settings
- Works slowly
- Poor grasp of abstract concepts
- Either pays too little attention to details or focuses on them too much
- Misreads information

If you recognize these symptoms in your child, do several things. First, talk to your child's teachers to get their input. Then your child will need to have a complete psychoeducational evaluation as soon as possible. This evaluation will quantify your child's aptitude for learning compared to the child's actual academic achievement, and determine the child's strengths and weaknesses as a learner. Public schools are required by law to provide this testing free of charge, but you may face a long wait. If you want more immediate results, see your pediatrician for a referral to a child psychologist or educational diagnostician who specializes in diagnosing learning disabilities. Some health insurance will cover the testing if mandated by your doctor.

The National Center for Learning Disabilities is also a wonderful resource for parents, whether you suspect that your child has a learning problem, or if you have already begun your LD journey. For a more in-depth LD Checklist of Signs and Symptoms, go to www.NCLD, Topics by Age, Grades K-8.

Good luck. Remember – you are your child’s best advocate. Don’t give up until you get the answers you need – your child is depending on you.

Margaret Thornton, M.Ed.

Head of School

Summit Academy