



Learning Disabilities: How Can I Spot Them?

PARENTS FREQUENTLY WONDER IF THEIR YOUNG elementary school child has a learning disability. According to a Department of Health and Human Resources study in 2004-2006, 4.7 percent of children aged 6-17 have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), 4.9 percent have learning disability (LD) and 3.7 percent have both. Both disabilities appear more frequently in boys. Given their prevalence, how can you spot them?

It's important to remember that there are many types of learning disabilities. These can include reading disabilities (sometimes referred to as Dyslexia), writing disabilities and math disabilities. More specifically, subtypes exist among the reading, writing, and math disabilities. Reading disabilities, however, account for 80 percent of all learning disabilities.

While learning disabilities can be hereditary, certain behaviors in toddlerhood and in the early elementary school years may be red flags. Many of these problems can be effectively addressed, however, with early intervention.

Much of LD research focuses on reading disabilities. It's clearly shown that difficulties with early language skills can later affect a child's reading skills. This

is because reading decoding skills, such as sounding out words, depends on a child's ability to hear and manipulate word sounds. What does this mean? If a child cannot hear rhyming patterns ("Cat rhymes with hat; what else rhymes with hat?"), he or she may be experiencing auditory/phonemic awareness difficulties. If he or she is not able to accurately hear word sounds, a child may then have difficulties with decoding the sounds in the printed word. The good news is that early interventions can help strengthen these phonemic awareness skills.

Other signs that a potential problem may be brewing include difficulties with learning the names of alphabet letters. This may seem a rather easy task for most children. For some, however, difficulty learning the names of letters becomes correlated with difficulty learning the letters' sounds. Without knowledge of sounds, reading cannot take off. Again, good strategies exist to assist with letter naming fluency.

Last, there is not as much information available about the early signs of math disabilities. Different math disabilities, however, do become detectable in the early elementary school years. For example, some children with math LD have a good grasp of math concepts (the "how to" of a problem) but have persistent trouble with

math calculation. In other words, they may struggle with basic computational errors when adding or subtracting and may make mistakes when performing multiple steps in a problem. Other children have trouble remembering basic addition, subtraction, multiplication and division math facts. Most children, after a few years of instruction, have gained automatic math skills; they can tell you automatically that $6 \times 4 = 24$ and that $7+8 = 15$. Children with deficits in fact recall have to laboriously use their fingers or count in their heads. Their answers are not automatic.

Regardless of a child's specific area of difficulty, the most important thing that parents can do to help their child is to intervene early. Fortunately, changes are occurring in schools that target research-based, early classroom interventions for students' specific areas of weaknesses. Parents are encouraged to speak to their children's teachers if they have concerns about their children's academic progress.

Editor's note: Aranda is a licensed psychologist (#PY5983) who specializes in psychological assessments and child and adolescent therapy. More information about her can be found at www.helpingtampafamilies.com.

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