

CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

Parents are often worried when their child has learning problems in school. There are many reasons for school failure, but a common one is a specific learning disability. Children with learning disabilities usually have a normal range of intelligence. They try very hard to follow instructions, concentrate, and "be good" at home and in school. Yet, despite this effort, he or she is not mastering school tasks and falls behind. Learning disabilities affect at least 1 in 10 schoolchildren.

It is believed that learning disabilities are caused by a difficulty with the nervous system that affects receiving, processing, or communicating information. They may also run in families. Some children with learning disabilities are also hyperactive; unable to sit still, easily distracted, and have a short attention span.

Child and adolescent psychiatrists point out that learning disabilities are treatable. If not detected and treated early, however, they can have a tragic "snowballing" effect. For instance, a child who does not learn addition in elementary school cannot understand algebra in high school. The child, trying very hard to learn, becomes more and more frustrated, and develops emotional problems such as low self-esteem in the face of repeated failure. Some learning disabled children misbehave in school because they would rather be seen as "bad" than "stupid".

Parents should be aware of the most frequent signals of learning disabilities, when a child:

- Has difficulty understanding and following instructions.
- Has trouble remembering what someone just told him or her.
- Fails to master reading, spelling, writing, and/or math skills, and thus fails schoolwork.
- Has difficulty distinguishing right from left; difficulty identifying words or a tendency to reverse letters, words, or numbers; (for example, confusing 25 with 52, "b" with "d," or "on" with "no").
- Lacks coordination in walking, sports, or small activities such as holding a pencil or tying a shoelace.
- Easily loses or misplaces homework, schoolbooks, or other items.
- Cannot understand the concept of time; is confused by "yesterday," "today," "tomorrow."

Such problems deserve a comprehensive evaluation by an expert who can assess all of the different issues affecting the child. A child and adolescent psychiatrist can help coordinate the evaluation, and work with school professionals and others to have the evaluation and educational testing done to clarify if a learning disability exists. This includes talking with the child and family, evaluating their situation, reviewing the educational testing, and consulting with the school. The child and adolescent psychiatrist will then make recommendations on appropriate school placement, the need for special help such as special educational services or speech-language therapy and help parents assist their child in maximizing his or her learning potential. Sometimes individual or family psychotherapy will be recommended. Medication may be prescribed for hyperactivity or distractibility. It is important to strengthen the child's self-confidence, so vital for healthy development, and also help parents and other family members better understand and cope with the realities of living with a child with learning disabilities.