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Learning Disabilities in Children

Up to 15 percent of all children at one time or another may have a learning disability. These children may have a hard time learning to read, write, do math, or grasp abstract concepts. Or they may be inattentive, hyperactive, impulsive, or otherwise easily distracted.

Children with learning disabilities do not necessarily have less intelligence. Their IQ is usually average and sometimes even above average. Thomas Edison, for example, was always at the bottom of his class. One day his teacher criticized him, and he never returned to school. Benjamin Franklin had difficulty with mathematics. And Albert Einstein was very late in learning to talk.

Of course, mental retardation can also influence learning, and that's a more serious problem. Here we will discuss the more common problem, where a child with normal abilities has difficulty with learning—usually in specific areas.

One fairly common example of a learning disability is dyslexia. This refers to a Greek word that means reading difficulty. A dyslexic child has difficulty grasping exactly what a written symbol means—in understanding the letters in a word and the words in a sentence, for instance. It's not due to a problem with a child's intelligence or eyesight.

Dyslexic children may have difficulties with math as well. It's not unusual for a child to be good at reading and poor in math—or good at math but poor at reading. When confronted with an entire paragraph, the child's confusion is typically even greater. We don't really understand why some children have dyslexia while others don't. However, we do know that it can be helped by certain educational methods, and the problem usually decreases as the child gets older—if the child and the teachers don't "give up."

Another learning disability is when a child has difficulty with abstract reasoning or with forming a general concept. For instance, students who can do arithmetic when they have numbers to look at might draw a blank without the written examples in front of them.

Still another learning disability makes it hard for some children to recognize the relationship of things in space—their own relationship to the ground and objects around them. As a result, these children may seem awkward and clumsy since they will often bump into objects and other people. They may also have poor handwriting and an inability to write down spoken instructions or information read aloud.

Language development may also be delayed for some children. This learning disability may result in a child having problems with speaking or with understanding what has been said.

Sometimes, the problem seems to be related to the child's attention span. An overactive and impulsive child may have a hard time settling down and working through a task, for instance. This specific diagnosis is often referred to as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD. Boys seem to have more problems with this than girls. Many children do just fine with a little extra attention and patience from the adults who work with them. Sometimes medication may be given for a period of time along with behavior modification.

Learning disabilities should be identified and cared for early—before they create so much frustration for the child that it leads to additional behavior problems. Of course, sometimes, certain children will simply need more time than their friends to mature and will catch-up once they get older. This is often typical for boys. However, it's probably not a good idea to assume that this is the case with your child, ignore the problem, and postpone professional assessment. If treatment is necessary, ideally, it should begin while the child is in kindergarten or the first grade.

If you're concerned that your child is having difficulty learning, talk with your child's teacher and pediatrician. Thoroughly evaluating a child with a learning problem may require a team of professionals, including educators, psychologists, and physicians. Although neurological tests or laboratory exams are usually not helpful, in some cases they may be useful. Depending on the type of learning disability, medication is sometimes also needed, especially if the problem is related to attention and concentration.

Strange as it may seem, some children who were thought to have learning disabilities were later discovered to have vision or hearing problems. But even if there is a physical basis for a learning disability, a student may need psychological counseling to help him or her overcome the feeling of defeat that can be so depressing for a child having problems in school.



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