

# LEARNING DISABILITIES

([www.understood.org](http://www.understood.org))

Learning disabilities (LDs) are real. They affect the brain's ability to receive, process, store, respond to and communicate information. LDs are actually a group of disorders, not a single disorder.

Learning disabilities are *not* the same as intellectual disabilities (formerly known as mental retardation), sensory impairments (vision or hearing) or autism spectrum disorders. People with LD are of average or above-average intelligence but still struggle to acquire skills that impact their performance in school, at home, in the community and in the workplace. Learning disabilities are lifelong, and the sooner they are recognized and identified, the sooner steps can be taken to circumvent or overcome the challenges they present.

## How Can You Tell If Someone Has a Learning Disability?

The hallmark sign of a learning disability is a distinct and unexplained gap between a person's level of expected achievement and their performance. Learning disabilities affect every person differently and they present differently at various stages of development. LDs can range from mild to severe and it is not uncommon for people to have more than one learning disability. In addition, about one-third of individuals with LD also have Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). While LD and ADHD can share common features, such as difficulties with concentration, memory, and organizational skills, they are not the same types of disorder. Unfortunately, LD is often confused with ADHD and is frequently mistaken as laziness or associated with disorders of emotion and behaviour. A careful and thorough review of concerns, with input from multiple sources (including parents, educators, physicians, psychologists, speech-language providers and, of course, the person themselves) is the only way to rule in or rule out a learning disability.

## **Learning disabilities can affect a person's ability in the areas of:**

- Listening
- Speaking
- Reading
- Writing
- Spelling
- Reasoning
- Mathematics

## LD Terminology

<b>Disability</b>	<b>Area of difficulty</b>	<b>Symptoms include trouble with</b>	<b>Example</b>
<b>Dyslexia</b>	Processing language	Reading Writing Spelling	Confusing letter names and sounds, difficulties blending sounds into words, slow rate of reading, trouble remembering after reading text
<b>Dyscalculia</b>	Math skills	Computation Remembering math facts Concepts of time and money	Difficulty learning to count by 2s, 3s, 4s, poor mental math skills, problems with spatial directions
<b>Dysgraphia</b>	Written expression	Handwriting Spelling Composition	Illegible handwriting, difficulty organizing ideas for writing
<b>Dyspraxia</b>	Fine motor skills	Coordination Manual dexterity	Trouble with scissors, buttons, drawing

## Information Processing Disorders

<b>Auditory Processing Disorder</b>	Interpreting auditory information	Language development Reading	Difficulty anticipating how a speaker will end a sentence
<b>Visual Processing Disorder</b>	Interpreting visual information	Reading Writing Math	Difficulty distinguishing letters like “h” and “n”

## Other Related Disorders

<b>Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)</b>	Concentration and focus	Over-activity Distractibility Impulsivity	Can't sit still, loses interest quickly, daydreams
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## What Causes Learning Disabilities?

**Experts aren't exactly sure what causes learning disabilities. In fact, there is often no apparent cause for LD. LD may be due to**

- **Heredity.** Often learning disabilities run in families. Children with LD are likely to have parents or other relatives with similar difficulties.
- **Problems during pregnancy and birth.** An illness or injury during or before birth may cause an LD. Drug and alcohol use during pregnancy, low birth weight, lack of oxygen and premature or prolonged labor may also lead to an LD.
- **Incidents after birth.** Serious illness, head injuries, poor nutrition and exposure to toxins such as lead can contribute to LD.

Learning disabilities are not caused by economic disadvantage or cultural differences, nor are they the result of lack of educational opportunity. That said, children who are denied timely and effective instruction during critical times during their development are at high risk for showing signs of LD during the school years and beyond.

## What Can You Do About Learning Disabilities?

Learning disabilities are lifelong challenges. Although they don't go away, they should not stop individuals from achieving their goals. A learning disability is not a disease, and there is no single course of treatment or intervention that works for everyone. The first step to overcoming the challenges posed by LD is to recognize that a problem might exist. Then seek help from qualified professionals, who can provide guidance through a personalized evaluation process. Working with a trusted team of professionals, it is then possible to identify the types of accommodations, services and supports that will lead to success.

### Identification

The LD identification process is not set in stone and will vary from state to state (for school age children) and from one adult to another depending upon the nature of the presenting difficulties and the professionals enlisted to provide testing and guidance.

For example, an elementary school age child who shows signs of dyslexia (specific LD in reading) might demonstrate excellent skills in math, so an evaluation would be tailored to better understand the specific components of reading (i.e., phonemic awareness, comprehension, automaticity) that would help with planning an appropriate course of instruction and intervention.

If a parent suspects that their child might have a learning disability, it is important that they record (in writing) their observations and share them with, teachers, physicians and others who might be able to confirm or add important detail. If informal efforts to help the child overcome these difficulties is not successful (over a short period of time the next step is to initiate (in writing) a request to begin a formal evaluation process.

### LD In Children

Early identification—the earlier, the better—is vital in helping a child to succeed academically and socially. Careful and honest observation is a key to understanding how well a child is progressing in their development of skills in important areas such as expressive and receptive language, fine and gross motor coordination, attention and socialization. Even preschoolers can show signs of risk for LD. And for some children, LD does not present itself until middle school or even high school.

Do you think your child is displaying signs of a learning disability? Don't panic. Not all children who are slow to develop skills have LD. Share your concerns with classroom teachers and others who come in contact with your child. And don't shy away from seeking more detail information and assistance. There is no shame in having a learning disability. The shame is knowing that there is a problem and not providing the help a child needs and deserves.

Once a child is found to have a learning disability, learn as much as possible about the types of supports that are available through school and in the community. Just as important, help the child to understand their specific challenges, assure them that LD is not an insurmountable hurdle and that they are not alone: other children struggle, too, and adults are there to help.

### LD In Adults

It is never too late to identify and get help for a learning disability. Finding out about a learning disability can be a great relief to adults who could not explain the reason for their struggles in the past. Testing for LD in adulthood is not uncommon

### Accommodations and Modifications

Once a learning disability is identified, different kinds of assistance can be provided. In addition to specialized, explicit types of instruction, children with LD are entitled to have accommodations (such as extended time, readers, and scribes) or modifications (such as abbreviated tests or alternate assignments) as appropriate. These guarantees are afforded to children with LD by law.