

Learning Disorders in Children



What is a learning disorder in children?

A learning disorder is when a child has trouble learning in certain school subjects. Your child may have problems with reading, math, or writing. Skills are below what's expected for the child's age, grade level, and intelligence. The problem is bad enough to interfere with school or everyday activities.

What causes a learning disorder in a child?

Experts believe a learning disorder happens because of a problem in the nervous system. The problem may be in the brain's structure. Or the chemicals in the brain may not work right. As a result, a child with a learning disorder receives, processes, or communicates information in a different way.

Which children are at risk for a learning disorder?

Learning disorders may run in families. They may also be linked to:

- Problems during pregnancy
- Problems during birth or early infancy
- Other health conditions, such as ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder)

What are the symptoms of a learning disorder in a child?

Each child's symptoms may vary. Common symptoms are:

- **Reading disorder.** A child reads below the expected level given their age, grade in school, and intelligence. Children with this problem read slowly and have trouble understanding what they read. They may have trouble with word recognition. They may confuse words that look alike. This disorder is sometimes called dyslexia.
- **Mathematics disorder.** A child has problems with numbers. They may have trouble counting, copying numbers the right way, adding and carrying numbers, learning multiplication tables, and recognizing math symbols.
- **Disorder of written expression.** A child has trouble with writing skills. They struggle with grammar and punctuation, spelling, paragraph organization, or written composition.

How is a learning disorder diagnosed in a child?

Parents or teachers may first spot the signs of a learning disorder in a child. The child may often have trouble with:

- Reading, spelling, writing, or doing math problems
- Understanding and following directions or staying organized
- Telling right from left
- Not reversing letters or numbers after first or second grade. Examples are confusing b and d, or 12 and 21.
- Recognizing patterns or sorting items by size or shape
- Understanding the concept of time

- Doing tasks with their hands like writing, cutting, or drawing

Before a mental health referral is made, your child's healthcare provider will want to rule out any other health problems. Once this is done, a mental health provider, such as a school psychologist, can appropriately diagnose a learning disorder. The provider will talk with parents and teachers. The child will also need educational and mental health testing.

Public schools have a duty to evaluate children with certain learning problems. When appropriate, these schools must also offer treatment. Check with your school to find out how to request an evaluation. An evaluation identifies if your child has a learning disorder. It also finds learning strengths and weaknesses. The results help decide on your child's educational needs and best placement at school.

A learning disability may greatly interfere with your child's ability to succeed in school. If so, then they may be eligible for certain protections and reasonable accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) or Section 504 of the Civil Rights Act. Talk with your child's teacher or principal about how to get more information.

How is a learning disorder treated in a child?

Treatment will depend on your child's symptoms, age, and general health. It will also depend on how severe the condition is.

Parents, teachers, and mental health experts work together to help a child. Treatments may include:

- Individual or group classes
- Special classes or resources
- Speech therapy
- Family therapy
- Medicines, if a child is easily distracted or hyperactive

How can I help prevent a learning disorder in my child?

Experts don't know how to prevent learning disorders in children. But spotting and treating one early can ease symptoms and enhance your child's normal development. It can also improve your child's quality of life.

How can I help my child live with a learning disorder?

A learning disorder has no cure. But early diagnosis and treatment can make it less severe. It will also improve your child's learning potential and quality of life.

You play a key part in your child's treatment and well-being. Here are things you can do to help your child:

- Keep all appointments with your child's healthcare provider and school personnel.
- Work with your child's healthcare providers and school to create a treatment plan. Your child likely will get care from a team that may include the primary care provider, school psychologists, therapists, social workers, and experts from your child's school. Your child's care team will depend on your child's needs and how serious the learning disorder is.
- Reach out for support from local community services. Being in touch with other parents who have a child with a learning disorder may be helpful.

Key points about a learning disorder in a child

- A learning disorder is when a child has problems with reading, math, or writing.
- It may be caused by a problem in how the brain is structured or in how the chemicals in the brain work.
- Physical problems and mental health issues that might interfere with learning are ruled out before a learning disorder is diagnosed.

- A child psychiatrist or other mental health expert, such as a school psychologist, can diagnose a learning disorder. They do an evaluation to find the child's learning strengths and weaknesses.
- Treatment may include therapy, special classes, or medicine.
- It's critical to work closely with your child's educational team, including teachers, school psychologists, and administrators.
- If a learning disability greatly interferes with your child's ability to succeed in school, they may be eligible for reasonable accommodations under the ADA or Section 504 of the Civil Rights Act. Talk with your child's teacher or principal about how to get more information.

Next steps

Tips to help you get the most from a visit to your child's healthcare provider:

- Know the reason for the visit and what you want to happen.
- Before your visit, write down questions you want answered.
- At the visit, write down the name of a new diagnosis and any new medicines, treatments, or tests. Also write down any new instructions your provider gives you for your child.
- Know why a new medicine or treatment is prescribed and how it will help your child. Also know what the side effects are and when they should be reported.
- Ask if your child's condition can be treated in other ways.
- Know why a test or procedure is recommended and what the results could mean.
- Know what to expect if your child does not take the medicine or have the test or procedure.
- If your child has a follow-up appointment, write down the date, time, and purpose for that visit.
- Know how you can contact your child's provider after office hours, and on the weekends and holidays. This is important if your child becomes ill and you have questions or need advice.

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