

Learning Disabilities

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Perhaps you have been in the situation where you knew your child was not achieving in school like he should. The teacher suggested that your child needed to be evaluated for special education. After the referral process was completed, you were told that your child had a learning disability. The teachers and school representatives may have assumed you knew what a learning disability was. Maybe they explained it, but perhaps they rushed through the definition or used a textbook definition that really was not clear.

I often talk to parents who are baffled by the problems presented by a child with a learning disability. Parents who do not understand the dynamics of a learning disability may have inappropriate expectations and fail to realize the child's potential. I had students whose limited understanding of their own learning disability impeded their ability to develop strategies for success. This article will provide a basic understanding of learning disabilities and future articles will develop strategies for success.

Definition

An accurate definition of learning disabilities has been disputed for many years. In the 1960's attempts were made to define the disorder of students who displayed an "unexpected" academic underachievement. The problem articulating a definition continues due to the fact that we are dealing with manifestations of the disability. The disability itself is unobservable and difficult to quantify. In other words, we are not able to take a measurement like we do for hearing or visual impairments. Instead we see the results of the disability as the child is intelligent and works hard but seems to be unable to learn in a specific area (math, reading, written language).

One place to find a definition of Learning Disabilities is in the law. The primary law in the United States that addresses children with disabilities is *Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)*. IDEA, formerly P.L. 94-142, the Education of the Handicapped Act (EHA), defines a learning disability as a "disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using spoken or written language, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or to do mathematical calculations"(20 U.S.C. §1401 [30]).

This is what we know from this regulation, a learning disability is 1) a processing disorder involving the way a person understands or uses spoken or written language and 2) it reveals itself in the way the person listens, thinks, speaks, reads, writes, spells, or does math. This means that a child has an intrinsic processing problem that causes academic under achievement.

A more complete definition was crafted by the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD, 1988) where they defined learning disabilities as:

... a general term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulty in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual, presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction, and may occur across the life span. Problems in self-regulatory behavior, social perception, and social interaction may exist with learning disabilities but do not by themselves constitute a learning disability. Although learning disabilities may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (for example, sensory impairment, mental retardation, social and emotional disturbance) or with extrinsic influences (such as cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction), they are not the result of these conditions or influence (p. 1).

It is important to note that this is a central nervous system dysfunction; it is thought to be a “different wiring” in the cortex of the brain. It does not include a learning problem that is primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities; mental retardation; emotional disturbance; of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage; or lack of adequate instruction or limited English proficiency.

The single term that we call “learning disabilities” describes a condition not a specific child with a specific problem. A child with a learning disability may exhibit a single characteristic or a combination of characteristics. Each child is unique, showing diverse characteristics in differing degrees. In my teaching experience I was reminded on a daily basis that the disability manifested itself differently for each student. Two students with learning disabilities will each encounter different challenges with instruction. The definition assists in classifying children with the disability; it does not help in designing instruction. Parents and teachers need to remember that instruction should be individualized based on an assessment of the child’s strengths and weaknesses. Each child has a “weakness in a sea of strengths” (Learning Disabilities Association, 2010). A child who has difficulty writing may be an amazing problem solver or a child who struggles decoding simple words may remember intricate details of information they heard.

Special Education Criteria

For years students with learning disabilities have been identified using an ability-achievement discrepancy formula. This is the difference between the child’s potential and his academic performance. It means given the child’s ability, as measured by an intelligence test, a certain level of performance is expected. Instead, the child’s achievement on a norm referenced achievement test is significantly below that expected level. IDEA 2004 no longer requires the ability-achievement discrepancy formula to be used, but allows for evidence of

lack of response to research-based interventions to be used as certification criteria. This means that instructional attempts to help the child learn have not had sufficient affect on their achievement and the resulting data may be used as evidence of a processing problem. In addition to unexpected under-achievement and evidence of a processing disorder, the student remains unsuccessful in managing the general education curriculum.

Characteristics

Students with learning disabilities are generally of average or above average intelligence. Since the student looks normal, without any visible signs of a disability, we often call learning disabilities a “hidden disability”. It is anything but hidden in academic areas. The student has good understanding, and in some areas the child excels above his classmates, but in the area of his learning disability he significantly underperforms. The US Department of Education, Office of Special Education lists the following areas of possible academic difficulties:

1. Spoken language: Delays, disorders, or discrepancies in listening and speaking
2. Written language: Difficulties with reading, writing, and spelling
3. Arithmetic: Difficulty in performing arithmetic functions or in comprehending basic concepts
4. Reasoning: Difficulty in organizing and integrating thoughts
5. Organization skills: Difficulty in organizing all facets of learning. (KidSource Online, 2009)

The students with learning disabilities may exhibit a wide range of traits including memory and organizational problems, auditory processing issues (spoken language), visual-motor processing deficits, reading or written language challenges or reasoning problems.

Another manifestation of learning disabilities includes a high co-morbidity with attention deficit disorder with or without hyperactivity. Other non-academic problems may include perceptual and coordination problems. Many students exhibit social skills issues associate with learning disabilities. Children with learning disabilities tend to be easily frustrated, impetuous, and easily defeated.

Remember each child is “wonderfully unique.” God created them with a unique blend of strengths and weaknesses. He intends to use us to develop the child’s strengths and help the child deal with his weaknesses.

The next article will look at the different types of learning disabilities: dyslexia (reading and related language-based learning disabilities), dysgraphia (writing or fine motor skills),

dyscalculia (arithmetic and math concepts), dyspraxia (sensory integration disorder—motor coordination), central auditory processing disorder (difficulty processing and remembering language related tasks), non-verbal learning disabilities (non-verbal communication), visual perceptual or visual motor deficits (letter reversals, copying difficulties, difficulty cutting), language disorders (aphasia/dysphasia—understanding spoken language/understanding written language). [Learning Disabilities Association, 2010]

References

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