

# Learning Difficulties

## What are learning difficulties?

Learning difficulties are a group of disorders involving significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning or mathematical abilities. These disorders are specific to the individual (and vary significantly between individuals) and are presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction.

Even though a learning disability may occur in conjunction with other handicapping conditions (e.g. sensory impairment, intellectual impairment, social and emotional disturbance) or environmental influences (e.g. cultural differences, insufficient/inappropriate instruction), it is not the direct result of those conditions or influences.

## What are the common features of learning difficulties?

Most learning difficulties are categorised as verbal or non-verbal learning difficulties.

### *Verbal:*

- Difficulty with both spoken and written words.
- Some people with verbal learning disabilities may be able to read or write adequately but have trouble with other aspects of language (e.g. they may be able to sound out a sentence or paragraph perfectly (thus reading well), but they can't 'make sense' of what they are reading or form a

mental picture of the situation they have read about).

### *Non-verbal:*

- Difficulty with the act of writing because the brain struggles to coordinate the many simultaneous tasks required (e.g. from moving their hand to form letter shapes to remembering the correct grammar required in a sentence).
- Difficulty processing what they see (e.g. having trouble making sense of visual details like numbers on a blackboard, confusing the '+' for '-' in Maths).
- Difficulties understanding abstract concepts such as fractions.

### **Common difficulties often (but not always) experienced by the child with learning difficulties:**

- Slow vocabulary growth, often unable to find the right word.
- Difficulty rhyming words.
- Trouble learning numbers, alphabet, days of the week, colours and shapes.
- Extremely restless and easily distracted.
- Trouble interacting with peers.
- Difficulty following directions or routines.
- Fine motor skills are slow to develop.
- Transposes number sequences and confuses arithmetic signs (+, -, x, /, =).
- Slow to remember facts.
- Slow to learn new skills, relying heavily on memory.
- Impulsive and has difficulty planning
- Poor pencil grip and subsequent handwriting.
- Trouble learning to tell the time.
- Poor coordination and tends to appear unaware of physical surroundings.
- Unable to complete tasks within given time frames.
- Reverses letters or confuses words.

### **Management strategies that support the child with learning difficulties**

**(at preschool, school and/or home):**

- Use of learning aids (including electronic spellers and dictionaries, word processors, talking calculators, books on tape).
- Carefully planned lessons for small learning increments.
- Scripted lesson plans.

**Occupational Therapy approaches and activities that can support the child and/or their carers include:**

- **Multi-sensory approach:** Using a multi-sensory approach to learning (i.e. using as many different senses as possible such as seeing, listening, doing and speaking).
- **Visual strategies:** Visual aids and instructions can assist with reading, spelling and task completion.
- **Visual cues** can be used to help sequencing tasks (or components within a task).
- **Visual modelling** in conjunction with a verbal cue helps improve a child's ability to follow instructions.
- **Problem solving:** Specifically instructing problem solving to known difficulties, rather than expecting the individual to transfer problem solving skills from one situation to another.
- **Story mapping** (planning on paper) before writing to assist with idea generation and story flow.
- **Independence:** Strategies to foster independence in learning, as well as self care, time management, and resource management.

**Speech Therapy approaches and activities that can support the child with a learning difficulty and/or their carers include:**

- **Multi-sensory approach** to learning (using as many different senses as possible, such as seeing, listening, doing and speaking).
- **Visual strategies:** Helping the family and the education setting to use visual strategies (e.g. picture time-tables and picture sequences to help follow instructions).

- **Speech and language assessment:** Providing information to those involved with the child about the child's exact level of the understanding, so that the language used is at an appropriate level for the child to understand.
- **Speech and language goals:** Setting up with parents/carers an individualised plan with small achievable speech and language goals to help develop the child's speech and language skills.
- **Daily activities:** Providing the family with strategies, activities and ideas that can be used during the day to help develop the child's speech and language skills.
- **Management strategies:** Providing the child with strategies to manage in situations when they don't understand (e.g. teaching them to put up their hands when, asking for help, asking for the question to be repeated, teaching some standard questions to ask when needed).
- **Liaising and working with educational staff** to provide information to be incorporated into an education plan and/or implementing ideas/suggestions, activities to help improve the child's speech and language skills and ability to access to the curriculum.
- **Fun games:** Teaching skills in a fun, play-based way.

## **Why should I seek therapy for my child with a learning difficulty?**

Diagnosis alone is NOT the solution. It simply opens the door to getting the help that is needed by arming all involved with the relevant information.

The 'help' still needs to be provided. The help that is provided (at least from a therapy perspective) will reflect:

- First and foremost what medical intervention is needed.
- What the parents/teachers/carers biggest concerns are for the child (i.e. what are the most significant functional challenges).
- The specific areas that are problematic to the child (which will vary even within children with the same diagnosis).
- The capacity of the child's environments to meet the child's needs.

## **If left untreated the child with learning difficulties may have difficulties with:**

- Following instructions within the home, preschool/kindergarten or school environment.
- Vocabulary whereby a child cannot clearly get their message across due to limited word knowledge.
- Understanding jokes and figurative language during interactions with others, and when watching TV shows and movies and reading books.
- Learning to talk, speech intelligibility and clarity.
- Self esteem and confidence when they realise their skills do not match their peers.
- Bullying when others become more aware of the child's difficulties.
- Fine motor skills (e.g. writing, drawing and cutting).
- Self regulation and behaviour as the child is unable to regulate themselves appropriately to settle and attend to a task for extended periods of time.
- Accessing the curriculum because they are unable to attend to tasks long enough to complete assessment criteria.
- Anxiety and stress in a variety of situations leading to difficulty reaching their academic potential.
- Academic performance: Developing literacy skills such as reading and writing and coping in the academic environment.
- Academic assessment: Completing tests, exams and academic tasks in higher education.

More specific implications of not seeking treatment will be influenced by the common difficulties that are most influencing your individual child.

*For more information see the relevant fact sheets under areas of concern or refer to the other relevant resources section below.*

## **What does the diagnosis of learning difficulties really mean for the child?**

Diagnoses are used to label a specific set of symptoms that are being experienced by a child.

## **This label then helps to narrow down and specifically tailor:**

- What other issues commonly occur simultaneously.
- What medication might be appropriate.
- What therapies might help the child (e.g. Medical, Occupational Therapy, Speech Therapy, Psychology).
- What the course of intervention (medical and/or allied health) might be and what outcome might be expected (prognosis).
- What can be done to help the child.

## **A diagnosis helps the child and their carers (parents, teachers, health professionals, carers) to:**

- Access information about the relevant cluster of symptoms.
- Communicate the salient features of the child's challenges to all people involved in the child's care.
- Possibly interpret certain behaviours differently in light of the diagnosis.
- Obtain information about what can be done to help the child.
- Determine specifically where and how to help the child.
- Access funding or services that might not otherwise be accessible.

Contact us today to make an initial enquiry or book an assessment for your child  
on 1800 KID SENSE (1800 543 736)

