

EVALUATION OF LEARNING DISABILITIES

INTRODUCTION

Pediatricians are often asked to provide guidance for parents who are concerned that their children may have learning problems in school. This handout explains what learning problems are and how the school system is organized to evaluate and treat children who may have such difficulties.

DEFINITION

If a child has average or above average intelligence and is performing poorly at school, he or she may have a learning disability (LD). This is a type of handicap probably caused by the makeup or function of a person's brain and may last throughout life.

CHARACTERISTICS OF LEARNING DISABILITIES

Learning disabilities have a wide range of characteristics and various degrees of severity. However, all learning disabled children have poor or uneven achievement even though they have normal intelligence. These children may show difficulties in one or more of the following areas:

1. Attention – Focusing attention is by far the most common learning disability for children. As a result, these children may often perform poorly in the classroom, on tests, or at home. They may be impulsive, and this may affect their ability to give thoughtful responses to questions. “Hyperactive” behavior may disrupt the classroom and social relationships. They may have trouble stopping inappropriate behavior. They may seem lazy or disinterested because they have difficulty focusing on details and become tired easily when they try to concentrate. Between 40 and 60 percent of children with attention problems have other learning disabilities as well.
2. Language – Some children may have difficulties with either receptive language or expressive language. Children who often ask to have things repeated or have trouble following multiple instructions may have difficulties with receptive language. Children who cannot express themselves clearly may have expressive language difficulties. They may often use the wrong words or mix up their words.
3. Visual-perceptual processing – Some children seem to see letters or words backwards. For example, they may confuse “b” and “d” or read “was” as “saw,” even after they have finished the third grade. They may also have difficulty learning to write and receive poor marks in penmanship.
4. Auditory-perceptual processing – Children with this kind of learning disability have difficulty focusing on important auditory or sound signals in the classroom, instead of background noises. For example, they may have difficulty listening to the teacher. They may appear inattentive and have trouble following spoken instructions.

5. Memory – Children may have trouble remembering basic information, like their home address or phone number. They may find it hard to remember multiplication tables or the days of the week. They may also have trouble with short-term memory and forget classroom instruction or where they are in telling a story or in conversation.
6. Fine motor control – These children may have trouble with hand skills like handwriting. They may have difficulty copying work from the blackboard. They may have trouble cutting with scissors.
7. Gross motor control – Children with these problems appear to be clumsy and awkward. They may drop things and bump into desks more often than other children.
8. Dyslexia and Dyscalculia – These children have specific and severe difficulties learning to read and doing mathematics.

CONSEQUENCES OF LEARNING DISABILITIES

Children who are not doing well in school may not feel good about themselves. If they feel they can't cope with the demands of the people around them, they may become withdrawn and isolated from their friends and social activities.

EVALUATION

A pediatrician alone cannot make the diagnosis of learning disability. It requires a multi-disciplinary evaluation by a team of experts in order to determine whether there are learning disabilities and to determine the best course of management. Until a complete evaluation is finished, the diagnosis remains unclear.

Parents who believe that their child may have learning disabilities should write a letter addressed to the Child Study Team at their local public school. Under Public Laws 101-336 and 101-476, the school is required to evaluate such children at no cost to the parents in a timely fashion. The policy of most health insurance companies is that learning difficulties are educational problems, not medical problems. Hence, they may not provide coverage for these evaluations or treatments.

A team of professionals, the Child Study Team, will meet to gather information about your child to determine the nature and degree of the learning disability and the child's educational needs. The evaluation includes testing and input from both teachers and parents.

Depending on the specific needs of the child, the team of professionals may include the following: social worker, learning disability specialist, speech/language pathologist, audiologist, physical therapist, occupational therapist, neurodevelopmentalist (pediatrician trained in problems related to learning, behavior and attention.)

This comprehensive approach is used to define the severity of the disability and to decide coping strategies for the child in the future. It is also important to make sure there are no medical problems underlying the child's condition. Parents are of utmost importance in the evaluation. All professionals rely heavily on the parents' observation of the problems to make meaningful recommendations.

TREATMENT PLAN

The results of the Child Study Team evaluation help determine whether your child is eligible to receive special educational services through the public school. The results are also used to formulate an Individual Educational Plan (IEP). The IEP must outline the following: the child's present performance, specific special educational services and who will provide them, short-term objectives and annual goals and objective criteria towards these goals on an annual basis.

If you have other questions about learning disabilities, you may contact the following organizations for additional information:

The Learning Disabilities Association of America
4156 Library Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15234
412-341-1515
ldaamerica.org

CHADD (Children with Attention-Deficit Disorder)
499 Northwest 70th Avenue
Suite 308
Plantation, FL 33317
305-587-3700
chadd.org