



**LEARNING DISABILITIES**  
**REFERENCE MANUAL**

Learning Disabilities Association of Alberta

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# **NATIONAL DEFINITION OF LEARNING DISABILITIES** **(adopted in 2002)**

Learning Disabilities refer to a number of disorders which may affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding or use of verbal or nonverbal information. These disorders affect learning in individuals who otherwise demonstrate at least average abilities essential for thinking and/or reasoning. As such, learning disabilities are distinct from global intellectual deficiency.

Learning disabilities result from impairments in one or more processes related to perceiving, thinking, remembering or learning. These include but are not limited to: language processing, phonological processing, visual spatial processing, processing speed, memory and attention, and executive functions (e.g. planning and decision-making).

Learning disabilities range in severity and may interfere with the acquisition and use of one or more the following:

- Oral language (listening, speaking, understanding)
- Reading (decoding, phonetic knowledge, word recognition, comprehension)
- Written language (spelling and written expression)
- Mathematics (computation, problem solving)

It is important to understand two key concepts - *disorders or impairments* and *processes*.

## **Disorders or Impairments**

Having a learning disability causes a number of disorders related to reading, writing, mathematics, and spelling. General skills such as listening, speaking or thinking may also be affected.

Simply put, a person with a learning disability may be just as intelligent, or even more intelligent, than most people. However, certain skills or subjects pose uncommon challenges. The important thing to remember is that learning disabilities can cause people to learn differently from others.

## **Processes**

Having a learning disability means that the brain processes information differently than most people. Information processing refers to how the brain:

- Receives information
- Uses information
- Stores information in memory
- Retrieves information from memory, and

- Communicates or conveys information

Individuals with learning disabilities have a hard time understanding certain kinds of information because their brain has a different way of processing it. That's why some types of information can be learned quickly while other information is much more difficult.

# FIVE MAIN CATEGORIES OF LEARNING DISABILITIES

Learning Disabilities can be divided into 5 main categories:

## **Visual Difficulties**

This means that the brain has difficulty handling information that the eyes see. These are conditions that cannot be eliminated by the use of glasses or contact lenses.

Examples of visual difficulties are:

- Poor visual memory. Unable to remember faces or words. There may be reversal in writing (e.g. *41* instead of *14*).
- Difficulty in seeing the difference between similar objects (e.g. *b* vs. *d*)
- Problems with visual tracking. Not being able to follow a line on a page.
- Poor figure group discrimination. Not being able to find the place to write one's name on an application form

## **Auditory Difficulties**

Examples of auditory difficulties include:

- Difficulty remembering verbal information and instructions.
- Trouble telling the difference between similar sounds or words (e.g. *bee* and *pea*, *seventeen* and *seventy*.)
- Confusing number sequences, lists or directions.
- Trouble hearing sounds over background noises.

## **Motor Coordination Difficulties**

Motor Coordination difficulties affect various motor functions such as:

- Eye/hand coordination causing difficulties with handwriting.
- Small muscle control that results in misjudging where to place things.
- Large muscle control causing clumsiness and difficulties with certain physical activities.
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## **Organizational Difficulties**

Organizational difficulties involve difficulty with organizing time, space or sequencing. Examples of this include:

- Poor sense of time
- Inability to organize tasks
- Difficulty organizing space such as a closet or desk
- The inability to analyze things or apply information in a new way

## Conceptual Difficulties

- Inability to understand abstract concepts, complex language, consequences and social cues
- Difficulty interpreting non-verbal language. This includes facial expressions or body language
- Difficulty understanding figures of speech
- Difficulty anticipating the future. This may involve doing something impulsive without considering the consequences
- Rigid thinking and the inability to see that flexibility is required to deal with a situation
- Poor social skills and peer relations. The person may not be able to make eye contact during a conversation or behave with the appropriate tone.

We know that learning disabilities result from the difference in how information is processed in the brain. But what causes a learning disability?

# **CAUSES OF LEARNING DISABILITIES**

Doctors and other health professionals who have been studying learning disabilities for years stress that no one knows exactly what causes learning disabilities. The following are believed to be probable causes:

## **Pregnancy and Birth Problems**

In some cases the mother's immune system reacts to the fetus and attacks it as if it were an infection. This disruption seems to cause newly formed brain cells to settle in the wrong part of the brain. Also, during delivery, the umbilical cord may become twisted and temporarily cut off oxygen to the fetus. This too can impair the child's brain function and lead to a learning disability.

## **Tobacco, Alcohol, and Other Drug Use During Pregnancy**

Many drugs taken by the mother pass directly to the fetus. Research shows that a mother's use of cigarettes, alcohol, or other drugs during pregnancy may have damaging effects on the unborn child.

## **Genetic Link**

Learning disabilities tend to run in families. A parent who has difficulty processing information may simply pass this difficulty along to the child.

Children with learning disabilities are likely to have a parent with a related problem. However, a parent's learning disability may take a slightly different form in the child. For example, a parent who has a writing disorder may have a child with an expressive language disorder. For this reason, it seems unlikely that specific learning disabilities are inherited directly. It's possible that a subtle brain dysfunction is inherited and leads to a learning disability.

Some learning difficulties may actually stem from the family environment. For example, parents who have expressive language disorders might talk less to their children or the language they use may be distorted. In such cases, the child lacks a good model for acquiring language and may seem to have a learning disability.

## **Environmental Toxins**

Researchers believe that children who are exposed to environmental toxins such as cadmium and lead may cause neurological dysfunction.

There is a variety of reasons to explain why a person has a learning disability. However, it is crucial that we also learn to recognize the signs of a potential learning

disability. The earliest possible intervention is critical to the person's success in school, in the workplace, and in other future endeavors.

# COMMON SIGNS OF LEARNING DISABILITIES

Here are some common signs that may indicate if someone has a learning disability:

## Infancy

- Trouble with nursing, sucking or digesting
- Resistance to cuddling and body contact
- Lack of or excessive response to sounds or stimulus
- Trouble following movements with the eyes
- Unusual sleep patterns
- Delays in sitting, standing, and walking
- Little or no vocalization
- Irritability

## Preschool

- Speaks later than most children and has immature speech patterns
- Slow vocabulary growth, often unable to find the right words, pronunciation problems
- Difficulty rhyming words
- Trouble learning numbers, the alphabet, the days of the week, colors, shapes
- Extreme restlessness and easily distracted
- Trouble interacting with peers
- Difficulty following directions or routines
- Difficulty with dressing
- Fine motor skills are slow to develop
- Exaggerated response to excitement or frustration
- Tendency to trip or bump into things
- Cannot skip, has trouble bouncing and catching a ball

## Grades K-4

- Slow to learn the connection between letters and sounds
- Confuses basic words (run, eat, want)
- Makes consistent reading and spelling errors including letter reversals (b/d), inversion (m/w), transposition (left/felt) and substitution (house/home)
- Transposes number sequences and confuses arithmetic signs (+, -, x, /, =)
- Slow to remember facts
- Slow to learn new skills, relies heavily on memorization
- Impulsive, difficulty planning
- Unstable pencil grip, poor printing, writing
- Trouble with the concept of time or learning how to tell time
- Poor coordination, unaware of physical surroundings, prone to accidents

- Difficulty cutting with scissors, coloring and printing inside lines
- Cannot tie laces, button clothes or get dressed
- Reads but does not comprehend
- Difficulty playing with more than one child at a time, may prefer to be alone
- Difficulty remembering the names of things such as seasons, months, streets, etc.
- Does not understand the difference between concepts such as “up and down”, or “top and bottom”
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- **Grades 5-8**
- Reverses letter sequences (soiled/solid, left/felt)
- Slow to learn prefixes, suffixes, root words, and other spelling strategies
- Avoids reading aloud
- Trouble with word problems
- Difficulty with handwriting
- Awkward, fist-like, or tight-pencil grip
- Avoids writing compositions
- Slow or poor recall of facts
- Difficulty making friends
- Trouble understanding body language and facial expressions
- Difficulty expressing ideas and relating events in sequence

## High School Students

- Continues to spell incorrectly, frequently spells the same word differently in a single piece of writing, laborious handwriting
- Avoids reading and writing tasks
- Difficulty putting thoughts on paper
- Trouble summarizing
- Trouble with open-ended questions on tests
- Weak memory skills
- Difficulty adjusting to new settings
- Works slowly
- Poor grasp of abstract concepts
- Either pays too little attention to details or focuses on them too much
- Misreads information, lacks logic, has poor reasoning ability
- Vulnerable to peer pressure, often the “scapegoat” in situations
- Difficulty organizing and/or concentrating on homework
- Rarely relates past events or experiences in sequence or detail

## Adults

- Excellent verbal ability but cannot express thoughts on paper
- Mechanical aptitude but difficulty with reading, writing or spelling

- Lacks social skills and has difficulty maintaining relationships or making friends
- Learns well when shown but cannot follow written and/or verbal instructions
- Feels constantly anxious, tense, depressed and has a very poor self-concept
- Has difficulty organizing belongings, time, activities or responsibilities

The presence of one or two of these signs may not be significant, but a cluster of these behaviors requires further assessment. It is never too early to seek help but waiting too long could be very harmful.

# **DEALING WITH A LEARNING DISABILITY**

Here are some important facts to remember when attempting to deal with a learning disability:

Learning disabilities are not the same as other disabilities such as developmental disabilities, autism, deafness, blindness, and behavioural disorders. None of these conditions are considered learning disabilities.

- Learning disabilities result from brain dysfunction which interferes with certain kinds of information processing.
- A learning disability can't be cured or fixed. It's a lifelong issue.
- With the right support and intervention, people with learning disabilities can succeed in school, in work, and in life.

So what can a person with a learning disability do to live a productive, happy life? Here are some suggestions for students, teachers, parents, adults, and employers.

## **Young Students**

School is where students experience making new friends, learning different subjects, playing sports, and dealing with adults. This assortment of experiences can sometimes be overwhelming, especially if students feel that they have trouble learning and coping with school work.

There are things that students can do to make school life easier.

### **Speak up**

There are appropriate accommodations that students can request to help them learn. Under the Alberta School Act, school boards are required to provide special education program for students with special needs. This is called an Individualized Program Plan (IPP).

### **Individualized Program Plan**

An Individualized Program Plan (IPP) is a concise program developed to assist students with special needs. The process involves schools, teachers, parents, and students (Go to [http://www.education.gov.ab.ca/k\\_12/specialneeds/SpecialEd\\_Stds2004.pdf](http://www.education.gov.ab.ca/k_12/specialneeds/SpecialEd_Stds2004.pdf)). It intends to provide appropriate accommodations for students diagnosed with learning disabilities.

### **Appropriate Accommodation**

An appropriate accommodation is a change that allows students to participate in school in a way that matches their learning strengths. Accommodations can include a private work area, extra time to complete tasks, having instructions repeated or

receiving instructions both orally and in writing. These accommodations should either help students learn better or give them a better way of expressing their abilities. Appropriate accommodations may include:

### **Taped Books**

Many students find it helpful to listen to taped textbooks or to have material read aloud by readers.

### **Readers**

A reader is someone who reads for a student with a reading difficulty. Readers can be helpful when a teacher gives an unscheduled assignment and there is not enough time to tape it.

### **Alternatives to note-taking**

Students who have trouble writing may have someone take notes for them. Students can also tape lectures if they have received permission from their teacher.

### **Alternatives for written composition**

Written assignments can be difficult for many students. Despite their intelligence, they may have trouble putting ideas together, using correct grammar and spelling, and writing legibly. Sometimes it helps to use word processors. Dictating and editing services can also be helpful.

### **Alternative ways to take exams**

If a student has trouble reading and/or understanding the exam questions, writing under pressure or organizing their thoughts, they may want to ask for accommodations when taking exams. Accommodations for test-taking include:

- Having material read by a reader
- Listening to taped tests
- Dictating answers to a scribe
- Having extended time to take a test
- Testing in a quiet area to avoid distractions

Each type of learning disability requires a certain type of accommodation. By acknowledging the difficulty and being open about it, students with learning disabilities can be accommodated in a way that helps them succeed.

### **Develop Your Strengths**

Students must explore the strengths they have and find ways to develop them. When students know what they can do well, they can use their unique strengths to accomplish their goals.

### **Believe in Yourself**

If students believe in themselves, they can adapt to different environments and situations. When they know their strengths and weaknesses, they can accept responsibility for their successes and failures. This self-knowledge can help them self-advocate for what they need to be successful.

## **As Parents**

Parenting is difficult enough under normal circumstances, but it is even more difficult for a parent of a child with special needs. However, there are ways for parents to help their child cope with his or her disability.

### **Acknowledge the Problem**

Discovering a child's special needs is often a confusing and painful process for parents. Parents often have a hard time knowing whether their child has a learning disability since learning difficulties can be subtle and difficult to pinpoint.

Parents may move through emotions like Kubler-Ross' *Stages of Grief*. According to Kubler-Ross, initially, parents deny there is a problem and then rationalize why it's not a problem at all. They then have to deal with the fear, the anger, and the guilt of having a child who has several difficulties. Parents must accept their child's learning disability and develop strategies to help emphasize their strengths and overcome their weaknesses. Here are some tips for parents:

### **Know Your Rights**

Under the Alberta School Act, all school boards must ensure that an Individualized Program Plan is developed, implemented, monitored and evaluated to assist students with special needs. Refer to the Standards for Special Needs.

### **Get Involved**

If a parent suspects their child has a learning disability, they can find out more by reading through different journals and research books or by using the Internet. If this is not enough, they may consult a professional for a more accurate diagnosis. Here are a few things parents can do to help their children:

### **Assign housework**

Provide clear structure in doing house chores. Children who have difficulty with organization can be best taught by being given clear instructions. For example, shelves can be used instead of drawers so children can see where things belong and how to put them back. The use of other visual cues, such as lists or labels, can augment efforts to help children organize tasks and belongings.

### **Develop understandable and reinforced routines**

It helps to give the child tasks in manageable chunks. It is also helpful to communicate instructions one by one. A large number of children with learning disabilities have language learning disabilities, which means they have trouble deciphering language, listening, and following instructions. Because of this, it is also helpful if parents and teachers limit the number of words used in giving directions. It's best to use simple phrases such as, "Go upstairs," "Close the window," and "Come down."

### **Engage the child in planning activities**

Including children in planning activities such as celebrations, developing lists, and shopping teaches them about taking on responsibilities.

### **Talk to your child's teachers**

Parents should discuss their child's case with teachers. Parents' cooperation with teachers can help children succeed in school by making sure the school can accommodate the child's special needs or use appropriate teaching methods.

### **Encourage learning and schoolwork at home**

Creating a home environment that encourages learning enables children to understand the benefits of learning. Establish a daily family routine of mealtimes with time for homework, chores, and bedtime as well as time for family activities. Children need to see that the skills they are learning in school are important for life.

### **Instill learning habits in your child**

Make sources of knowledge available to children. Sources of knowledge include books, magazines, and newspapers that are appropriate for children. Children should also be taught how to use the internet effectively.

### **Encourage your child to use the library**

Ask the librarian to tell your child about special programs that he or she might be able to participate in, such as summer reading programs and book clubs. Ask about services such as homework help.

### **Encourage your child to be responsible and to work independently**

Taking responsibility and working independently are important qualities for school success.

### **Show an interest in what your child does in school**

Support his special interests by attending school plays, musical events, science fairs or sporting events. Offer praise and encouragement for achievement and improvement.

## **Promote Self-esteem**

When children with learning disabilities begin to notice that they have difficulty with tasks that other children find easy, they begin to feel bad about themselves. Remember that children with learning difficulties are as confused about why they can't seem to learn like others. Criticisms won't do anything good for them. It will only damage their self-esteem.

- Instead of focusing on a child's weaknesses, divert attention to what he or she does well.
- Comment on the positive as much as possible by offering concrete comments on what the child does well.
- Use specific phrases to praise children's behaviour, such as, "You finished the assignment," or "You cleaned the table after dinner, Thank you." With specific praise, a child can be very clear on what behaviours are liked and expected.
- Visual, concrete proofs of progress will help children notice and feel confident about their accomplishments.
- Home-made certificates, gold stars, stickers, charts, and check lists with lots of checks are among other things that make children feel recognized for their accomplishments, whether in school or at home.
- Boost the child's self-esteem by supporting his or her interests and other talents. Whether it's an art form, science, nature, photography, computer work, selling things, inventing or telling stories, children need to believe that what they're doing is important.

Children with learning disabilities need parental support. It won't help them feel better about their academic performance, but it will help them feel better about themselves.

## **Empower Your Child**

Children with learning disabilities often feel powerless and inadequate. They tend to be passive learners and need to be totally involved in activities to make them active learners. Involving children in hands-on activities, such as cooking, cleaning or shopping can help them gain confidence.

Parents have the tendency to do too much for their children, especially those with learning disabilities. This strategy may be good at some point, but it does not guarantee long-term success. Doing too much for children does not empower them. Children need to be taught to view obstacles as challenges which be overcome with family support.

It also helps to teach the child problem solving strategies rather than always providing the answers. Grappling with adversity, figuring out strategies that work for them, and learning when to ask for help are crucial life skills that children must learn.

## **As Teachers**

While the majority of a student's program should be as closely aligned with the general education curriculum as possible, some accommodations and modifications may be necessary when it comes to students with learning disabilities. Recent research confirms that students with learning disabilities can be taught how to learn. It's important to understand the student's specific learning disability and devise a strategy to help the child learn better.

### **Get Involved**

When a teacher suspects that a student has difficulty learning a specific subject or task, the teacher should schedule a meeting with the student's parents. By consulting the child's parents, the teacher can gain a better understanding of child's difficulties.

### **Educate Yourself**

We know that there are private schools where children with special needs can go, but we also know that not all families can afford to send their children to these schools. That's why it's important for teachers to learn more about the different types of learning disabilities. With this knowledge, teachers can develop teaching strategies that work.

### **Create an Appropriate Teaching Strategy**

Ensuring that students understand what they are studying and are able to apply it effectively is very important. Success for students with learning disabilities requires a focus on individual achievement, progress, and learning. This requires individualized, intensive remedial instruction for students who are struggling. Here are some suggested ways to aid students with specific learning disabilities:

#### **Slow reader or reading difficulty**

Use a "read-along" technique in which taped texts and materials allow learning of printed materials. Supplement the subject matter being read with video tapes, DVDs, captioned TV programs, or computer software. Educational videos and films or talking books can provide the general information that cannot be acquired from the printed page.

#### **Memory problems or difficulty taking notes**

A fellow student might share notes or the student might tape the lesson. A teacher could also provide a copy of the lesson outline.

#### **Short term memory problems**

A table of facts or, for math problems, a calculator could be provided.

### **Handwriting difficulties like slowness, illegibility or reversed letters**

A cassette recorder or a computer with word processing software could be used for written work or tests.

### **Difficulty with spelling**

A dictionary or computerized spell checker can help make written materials readable. Use a multi-sensory approach which combines speaking, spelling aloud, and writing words.

### **Difficulty reading cursive, small, or crowded print**

Typed handouts, large print, or double spaced materials can help.

### **Poor memory and listening skills**

Poetry, rhymes, songs, audio-taped materials, and mnemonics may improve performance.

### **Vocabulary and comprehension problems**

Include a student-developed file of vocabulary words and the use of word webs and visual organizers to relate words and ideas heard or read. A dictionary or thesaurus suited to the child's learning level is also an excellent tool for building vocabulary, spelling, and reading comprehension.

### **Difficulty organizing time, materials and information**

A variety of approaches can be used, including:

- A quiet, uncluttered homework space
- An alarm watch
- Purchased texts that can be marked with a highlighter
- A homework assignment diary coordinated between home and school
- Study skills instruction
- A personally-developed date-book or scheduler

For students who copy inaccurately but need written practice to solidify learning, leaving a space directly under each word, phrase or sentence may help. Having handouts on the desk for those who can't copy from the blackboard or take dictation accurately is also a good idea. For left-handed students, place the list of words in the right-hand margin. For students with large writing, provide enlarged spaces for "fill in the blank" activities.

For students who are slow to process auditory information allow sufficient wait-time for the answer or provide the questions in written form. Oral and written language should be taught together as much as possible. Illustrations in a book being read should be used to generate conversation, vocabulary, and concepts that will relate to what is to be read. Material that is read can be translated into a verbal summary, a word web, a visual organizer, or a computer presentation.

## As Adults / Professionals

The impact of learning disabilities is life-long. The same issues that make school work so challenging for children also make work challenging for adults. Making the transition into the working world can be especially challenging for those with learning disabilities. People with learning disabilities should consider the following questions as they move into the work world:

- What is the potential impact of the learning disability on job performance?
- How or when does one disclose a disability?
- What are typical accommodations made in the workforce?
- What kinds of social demands and interactions are needed?

Learning disabilities impact not only education but also the careers people pursue. Vocational goals must be analyzed in relation to one's learning disability. What kind of tasks will the job entail? When answering these questions, evaluate the work environment, the type of coworker interaction, specific tasks one must perform, and how one is evaluated. Here are a few suggested strategies for finding success in the workplace:

### Develop a History of Work Experience

Look for opportunities to gain work experience. Some examples include:

- Campus leadership opportunities, i.e. student government, mentoring programs, organization involvement, etc.
- Work study positions on campus
- Internships
- Off-campus jobs that may be listed in the college career center
- Summer jobs
- Talking to family and friends about job opportunities
- Understand the Job Culture

Research the company's or organization's culture. The culture consists of company rules, values, and beliefs which are widely held but often unspoken. Adjusting to the work environment will be easier with this knowledge. Here are some things to try:

- Observe your co-workers
- Know what is expected of you
- Watch how others communicate and interact

### Research Job Accommodations

Match job tasks with individual strengths and weaknesses to identify specific accommodations that will enhance job performance. Accommodations that may be used in the workplace include:

- Tape recorders
- Taped materials

- Dictation
- Written instructions
- Demonstration of tasks/assignments
- Diagrams to explain an assignment
- Extended time on projects
- Separate work space
- Spelling and grammar check software for computers
- A word processor
- Color coding of files
- Talking computers or spell checkers

### **Identify and Tap into Your Support System**

Family, loved ones, friends and co-workers can be a critical variable to successful employment.

## **As Employers**

Research since the 1970's shows that approximately 1 of 10 Canadians has some type of a learning disability that causes serious problems in school achievement or at completing work tasks. It is important that employers are aware of the fact that some of their employees may have learning disabilities. Here are a few suggested ways that employers can help employees with learning disabilities:

### **Accommodate Employees**

For supervisors, assist the employee with pinpointing his or her specific strengths and weaknesses. It's best to work together to address the learning difficulty. If the employee has math problem, illustrate concepts graphically, break down problems into small parts, and use a pocket or talking calculator. Employees can also be partnered with someone for an accuracy check.

Train people who have communication difficulties to double check their information. Have them write everything down and then read it back to check the details. In meetings, use handouts and charts as much as possible to accommodate people who learn better visually than orally.

Use role-playing, videotapes, hands-on experience, and follow-up assignments as techniques to train employees. Use computer software that allows written material to be scanned into the computer and read aloud to the reader.

Some managers may dismiss individual supervision as too time-consuming and costly. But companies that have learned effective supervision techniques quickly bring out the best in each worker. Motivation is increased and people's energies and talents are directed efficiently and profitably.

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