

## **Why do some intelligent students have difficulty learning? Understanding Learning Disabilities-Part I**

Students with learning disabilities are of normal to high intelligence however their talents do not show up in standardized testing. It is as if they have different intelligences than other students. The difficulties that they face in school often end up building coping strategies, creativity, and later success in life. With the proper help these students will contribute to society in many ways with their gifts.

Learning Disabilities were not recognized until the 1960s. They may have a neuropsychological base. Mechanisms in the brain cause learning to be insufficient and/or inconsistent. Learning disabilities are not to be confused with a student with a developmental disability or retardation. LD students have normal to above average intelligence but have trouble receiving, processing, or expressing information. They are not stupid, but are often convinced they are because of their difficulties.

How do you know if your child has a learning disability? The Law states that a specific learning disability exists if the student does not achieve at the proper age and ability levels in one or more of several specific areas. In other words, if the student has a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability in one or more areas then the child may have a learning disability.

Some problems that can occur are (this is not a complete list): difficulties with memory, distractibility, right-left confusion, reversals-dyslexia, visual-spatial difficulties, motor problems, difficulty with languages, difficulty with basic math facts, poor listening skills, poor written language skills, difficulty with organization. Students with learning disabilities often have these combined with social problems and difficulty with relationships.

Unfortunately learning disabilities are not outgrown. These are lifelong conditions that people can learn to manage. Not addressing the problems and refusing to get proper diagnosis and remedial attention perpetuates the student feeling that it is their fault. There is a tendency of both parents and teachers to blame the student for their problems, that if they just "tried harder" or "weren't so lazy" it would go away.

Only linguistic and mathematical intelligences are routinely tested and valued in our system. Howard Gardner, a prominent expert in human intelligence, in his book "Frames of Mind" discusses multiple intelligences. There are seven different areas of intelligence. People with these other intelligences are needed in our world. Many creative geniuses have had learning disabilities. It is very important that we nurture their talents and remediate their problems.

People with learning disabilities often hide behind masks in order to preserve their self-esteem. They would rather appear lazy or the class clown than stupid. The student may pretend they don't care or hide behind lies; he or she may act helpless or blame his or her teacher for the problem.

When students' talents are nurtured along with addressing the need for remediation the student can learn to own control of their reality instead of hiding. Students can learn what teaching methods work for them, by discovering how they learn best and using those strategies they can succeed in spite of the disability. Learning to seek help is an important step in the process. Often this is achieved with the individual attention of a tutor.

## **How to recognize a child with a Learning Disability? Understanding Learning Disabilities-Part II**

Students with learning disabilities hide behind masks in order to conceal the real problem. The class clown, the con, outrageous behavior, boredom and are often ways students have learned to use as coping mechanisms. Once a student learns that they indeed can learn and they start to understand what teaching methods and study skills they need to succeed they are often capable of dropping the masks they have used to hide behind in the past.

Successful adults who have a learning disability develop perseverance often being described as full of great energy, more enthusiastic, able to work longer. Once they find their goal they go after it with sheer tenacity and single mindedness. Because they have experienced failure far more than other students they must either give up or learn to be a fighter and prove they are competent. Negative traits also develop including stubbornness and rigidity; often they see only one way to do things. Because they need to work ten times harder for their successes than the rest of us they succeed at great personal cost.

Many of the failures the LD student experiences can be directly related to their preponderance for disorder. The mess builds until they don't know where to start. People with LD often do not learn organization by watching those around them, they must be taught directly how to organize, plan and to think ahead. However, they do not need lectures, they need to be shown coping strategies.

There are many specific learning disabilities but one of the main indicators that a student has learning disability is a problem with memory. The filing system in the brain appears to be disorganized random and inconsistent. This trait causes one of the most serious problems for them. They suffer from both short and long-term memory problems. When they cannot remember what they have studied they feel stupid. This makes academic success difficult. Unintentionally they look lazy or stupid. Techniques to help them include creating mental images use of mnemonic devices and the use of key words to trigger recall. Taping classroom lectures, highlighting books, listening to tapes of textbooks and then transcribing the tapes into notes.

Neurological immaturity or dysfunction makes it difficult for a person with a learning disability to integrate several things at once. They can only do one thing at a time. It takes supreme effort for the person with LD to stay focused. They should always sit near the front of the class.

In addition to focus problems their internal monitors of time are often inaccurate. This causes them to be late for school and later to jobs. Procrastination also falls into the time related pitfalls they experience. They often confuse left and right or have coordination problems. Organizing their time and their study materials is one of the greatest tasks they face. Coping strategies include making lists, setting up routines, setting alarms, and using graph paper when dealing with numbers. Since they lack the internal parameters routines and reminders must be prevalent. Eventually they may overcompensate, become overly organized.

## **Helping Students Learn Understanding Learning Disabilities-Part III**

This is a continuing discussion on the topic of learning disabilities. In the prior two articles discussion centered on the types of problems students may be having and what may signal that a student may have a learning disability. In this section we look at learning styles and the difficulties this causes in the classroom.

All students have a preference for a particular way of learning. Some need to see things in order to learn, others need to combine seeing and touching, some need to have auditory (hearing) input along with seeing in order to learn best. Other people need to see a demonstration. Still others need to write it down in order to learn it.

Most teachers still use lecturing and reading as the primary way to deliver information to students. Because learning disabled students have much stronger preferences for particular learning styles they become lost in a regular classroom setting. Their embarrassment in asking for help sets them up for failure, they may quit the task instead of getting the help they need, thus letting the task victimize them.

Teachers and parents can help by understanding that the student may need to receive information in a different way. Learning information in concrete ways often helps them file it into their brains. The student may also have a problem gathering, processing, ordering, storing or retrieving concepts and information. These are complex brain functions that do not always function properly. Information is often dislocated and cannot be retrieved properly when a student has a learning disability.

Students, especially students with LD, benefit from active learning. A student who is actively involved in the process of learning in labs or in constructive play owns what they have learned and it will often stick. Learning is not something that is done to them or for them they are doing it themselves. Unfortunately teaching in this manner takes a great deal of teacher creativity; it also requires a different type of curriculum. This type of instruction has been used in the general classroom in pilot programs had had found only limited success, probably because it requires a smaller teacher student ratio along with many more hands on materials. This translates to more costly programs, which are difficult for districts to afford.

The anxiety and fear of failure these students feel can be helped by giving them additional time on tests, having the directions on the test read out loud in order to avoid confusion. Modifications along with remediation of the student's difficulties and the nurturing of talents must be done simultaneously in order to foster the students self esteem, which is often in need of repair by the time the learning disability is discovered

Learning disabled students may have difficulty with tasks which require a backwards organization such as subtraction and division. They will often find it nearly impossible to keep multiplication and addition facts memorized. It is important that parents and educators do not give up on teaching these basics. However, students at the junior and senior high school level need to move forward in spite of these difficulties learning to focus on the process of problem solving not just the product. Students with a diagnosed learning disability will benefit greatly by being given access to the use of technology. A calculator for math facts and a language-processing program for spelling will be very beneficial.

## **Learning Styles and Preferences Understanding Learning Disabilities-Part IV**

Many adults and students who have difficulty learning are especially creative and talented. They may be extremely impulsive, and have divergent ways of thinking; they have worked ten times harder for their successes than the rest of us. They need to exert great energy inventing ways to remember things; often they seem confused in time and space sometimes needing to follow landmarks instead of remembering a set of directions.

Many LD people are extremely perceptive and empathetic to others and show great insight. Some can be con artists and can talk their way out of anything. Often they show quick intelligence and excellent problem solving skills. All of us prefer a particular way of learning but some people require that information be delivered in a particular way. Some people are visual learners, some are auditory (learning by hearing), some require a demonstration, some need to touch it and feel it, and others need to write something down. A person with a learning disability may need combinations of these.

Neurological immaturity or dysfunction can make it difficult for them to integrate several things at once such as listening and writing at the same time. Only one thing can be done at a time. This makes them appear inflexible and stubborn. Yet, in order to succeed they must display dogged tenacity and great drive.

Some students have fluent speech and syntax but when they try put their ideas on paper the sentences are clumsy and the language obscure and disorganized. Given a complex task such as writing a paper these students must be taught directly to focus on the main task, breaking down the task into its component parts, sequencing the parts in terms of importance.

Many are defeated by handwriting or spelling but can often forge ahead at a higher level of composition if the mechanics are done for them by the use of a computer. Dictation programs are available to help students who loose track of their thoughts before they can get them on to paper.

Students with diagnosed disabilities may need modifications in their school programs. These modifications can include: taping lectures, having their own copy of the book so they can highlight the important parts, transcribing taped notes into written notes, finding books on tape, creating a quiet place free of distractions for studying and taking tests, sitting near the front of the class, taking test in a quiet room (even a clock ticking could be too much distraction), being given oral exams, having additional time of tests, Having access to technology (work processors, calculators), additional tutoring- to answer their extensive questions, having someone read the directions out loud.

For diagnostic information you may contact an educational psychologist or your child's counselor. If you would like a reprint of this paper in its entirety please contact Peggy Cannistraci at Math Support. We are available for tutoring and support for junior and senior high school mathematics - **please call 255-1730.**

## Understanding Learning Disabilities-Part V

To be successful learners students need to return to things they have failed at determined to succeed. This stubbornness often contributes to their later success. Many of these students have difficulty focusing on things because their thoughts are disorganized, frequently jumping around. Yet, when they lock in on something that interests them they show that they are capable of great concentration and tenacity that reaches the point of absurdity.

Successful people who battle with a learning disability are frequently described as having great enthusiasm and energy almost obsessed with being successful. Often this can be negative and the job is completed at terrible personal cost to them and their relationships.

Technology and computers are now readily available to students. Most schools have a computer lab and computers available in the classroom. For a student with a learning disability who has developed a sensitivity to criticism having their work edited by a word processing program for mistakes is often easier than having it edited by a parent or teacher. Feelings are spared.

Students with these learning problems sometimes have to fail a few times before they are ready to accept outside help. They will eventually learn to own responsibility for their own actions. As a parent you will need to directly teach the skills needed to become a responsible adult. They need to learn how to set goals for themselves, monitor their own behavior, how to plan ahead (usually in writing), how to think critically and make their own choices and decisions. Adults who are dealing with the student must realize that these skills develop in these students at a slower pace than other students their age and require direct learning experiences. In other words these skills must be taught.

They must be taught to put the needs of others before their own; they must learn to curb their impulsive behavior and exercise self-control. Encouraging to set goals at an early age. Planning activities such as studying must be taught, learning to sequence tasks. It is far more important to teach a student with a learning disability how to approach a task than to teach them how to do the task. They need to learn not to rationalize or make excuses.

Some people with LD are so afraid of embarrassment and failure that they over plan and over regulate themselves. They can learn to relax and enjoy themselves by adding exercise or yoga into their lives.

Once people with LD accept and learn about their shortcomings they can also learn about their strengths and believe in themselves. They can and will accomplish remarkable things. The most important thing the student can learn is that they are not "stupid". Failure to recognize and treat students with learning difficulties makes them extremely vulnerable to depression and substance abuse. A common complaint of parents is that the child is lazy, this is a defensive strategy that should be recognized for what it is.

Chemical dependency offers escape from negativism, criticism, ridicule and humiliation. The most important thing a parent can do is to believe in the student and convince the students that they believe in them. Giving specific praise, not global praise. Stop BLAMING the student for their problems. The laziness, willfulness and

manipulative behavior the student exhibits are defense mechanisms. The disability is intrinsic to the individual, parents can make them better or worse but they can't cause them.

The definition of a learning disability is a discrepancy between IQ and functioning level. In other words the person with the disability has the intelligence to succeed but for some unknown reason they are not being successful. Once the child has been screened for other problems such as vision or hearing then it can be determined if the student has processing problems or memory difficulties or another disability. When the student's educational plan is individualized properly the student will be capable of succeeding. Creative teaching techniques are used to help the student learn that they are capable of succeeding. Diagnostic and prescriptive tutoring, focusing on strategies, learning problem solving and organizational techniques, implementing the uses of technology is all very helpful.

For diagnostic information you may contact an educational psychologist or your child's counselor

Math Support provides a very necessary safe place for students with difficulties in mathematics to ask questions and learn mathematics without the fear of embarrassment.

### **What the LD Student Can Do to help Themselves. Understanding Learning Disabilities-Part V**

Once students accept their limitations and understand their strengths they become less hard on themselves emotionally while increasing their expectations of themselves in regards to their goals. Once they realize that they can actively take control and advocate for themselves they feel less helpless.

Once a disability has been diagnosed the law protects the rights of the person to accommodations to facilitate their success. The same law that protects the rights of a student who needs a wheelchair to attend school allows the student with the learning disability to ask for and receive the accommodations necessary for him to succeed in the classroom.

Typical accommodations needed by students with a learning disability include:

- Access to computers inside and outside the classroom- word processing.
- Access to a tape recorder for taking notes, NCR paper and a classroom volunteer is another method to accomplish this.
- Access to a calculator to speed up calculations.
- Access to books on tape to help them with reading material
- Extra time on tests and labs.
- Tutoring in areas that are difficulty.
- Oral exams.
- A reduced course load.
- Modified or reduced problem sets
- Taking tests in a quiet room- less noise and distractions.
- Access to a list of formulas (students must know how to apply them) when memory difficulties are present.

Following a diagnosis the student needs to ask:

- ❖ What are my strengths?
- ❖ What are the areas I am weakest in?
- ❖ What specific recommendations do you have?
- ❖ Do I need individualized help?
- ❖ Where can I get the help I need?
- ❖ What approaches to teaching do you think will work best for me?

People with LD often have superior abilities in interpersonal skills and communication, including an ability to be sensitive to the feelings of others, and read the emotions of others. For others social situations are difficult, making friends and keeping them is problematic.

There are over 100 different types of LD and even following diagnosis the process of learning how to learn is ongoing. It is important to understand that we are all individuals with strengths and weaknesses, Seek and receive the help you need, giving up is not an option.

Math Support provides tutoring to students from the highly gifted to students with learning problems. Everyone benefits from one-on-one instruction. For diagnostic information you may contact an educational psychologist or your child's counselor.