

Learning Difficulties

Learning difficulties are often referred to as “learning differences”. This is because the main indication that a child or adolescent has a learning difficulty is when he or she is not learning the way that is expected, or is seen as the “norm”. The result is that he or she will be underachieving in some, or many, aspects of their education.

The term “learning difficulties” relates to significant and unusual difficulties in the acquisition and use of one or more of the following areas: **listening, speaking, reading, writing** and **mathematical skills**.

In Australia learning difficulties are also referred to as “learning disorders”, “learning disabilities”, and/or “specific learning difficulties”. Learning difficulties are not indicative of intelligence levels, in fact some children demonstrate high levels of intelligence in some specific areas such as visual-spatial ability or motor skills. On the other hand, some other children have what we call “global learning difficulties”, and they will be seen as “slow learners” in all academic areas.

Learning difficulties are **not primarily due** to low intelligence, sensory problems such as vision or hearing problems, emotional problems or poor parenting or teaching. However, they may be **associated with a diagnosed primary problem** such as an attention problem (e.g. AD-HD), a Pervasive Developmental Disorder (e.g. Asperger’s Syndrome) or a Communication Disorder (e.g. Specific Language Impairment).

Some common signs of learning difficulty.

Children and adolescents with learning difficulties are seen as a heterogeneous group, that is they are all individuals with different types and degrees of learning difficulty. However, the following is a list of many of the **common characteristics** of learning difficulty:

- Average to above average general ability, but with under-achievement in some learning areas.
- Difficulties with the development of literacy skills: reading accuracy and comprehension, spelling, written expression.
- Difficulty with “multi-modal” tasks, such as listening to the teacher at the same time as copying from the board or making something.
- Taking longer than other children to carry out and complete a task.
- Trouble remembering ideas in sequence such as times tables or the words to a song.
- Difficulty concentrating and paying attention, and easily distracted.
- Memory problems e.g. can’t follow instructions especially if there are many parts, can’t remember newly learned information such as Maths concepts.
- Organisation difficulties e.g. a poor concept of time, or forgets to bring the right equipment to class.
- May have a history of delayed developmental milestones e.g. speech and language, or motor skills.
- May have a family history of learning difficulties.

Recognising Specific Learning Difficulties

There are terms used for some very specific types of learning difficulty. The following are some of the most commonly used terms, each with a brief description.

Dyslexia

There are many different definitions and professional views of Dyslexia, which affects 5-10% of the population. The following definition has been formed by the Australian “Dyslexia Working Party” (Helping people with dyslexia: a national action agenda, 2010), and is based on definitions published by the British Dyslexia Association, the International Dyslexia Association, the International Reading Association and the Rose Report on Dyslexia (UK):

Dyslexia is a language-based learning disability of neurological origin. It primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling. It is frequently associated with difficulties in phonological processing. It occurs across a wide range of intellectual abilities with no distinct cut-off points. It is viewed as a lifelong disability that does not respond as expected to best-practice evidence-based classroom methods for teaching reading.

Dysgraphia

Dysgraphia means “difficulty expressing yourself in writing”, and is a specific learning difficulty that affects the ability to recognise and form letters, and recognise the relationship between speech sounds and written letters. Children and adolescents with dysgraphia commonly have persistent

and greater-than-average difficulties with:

- Spelling
- Letter formation, such as reversing the similar-looking letters p, b, q and d
- Writing appropriately sized and shaped letters, and spaced words
- Writing the right words, and generally formulating their thoughts onto paper.
- Poor, messy handwriting
- Tiredness when writing

Dyscalculia

Dyscalculia means “a difficulty learning or comprehending mathematics”. Difficulties impact a range of areas, such as an inability to understand the meaning of numbers, to an inability to apply maths concepts to solving problems. The SPELD Foundation list the following common characteristics of Dyscalculia in school-age children:

- Poor mathematical concept development
- Lack of understanding of mathematical terms
- Confusion over printed symbols and signs
- Difficulty solving basic maths problems using addition, subtraction, multiplication and division
- Poor memory of number facts e.g. times tables
- Trouble in applying knowledge and skills for solving maths problems
- Weakness in visual-spatial skills, where a child may understand the required maths facts, but has difficulty putting them down on paper in an organized way
- Frequent reversal of single figures and reversal of tens and units (e.g. 34 written as 43)

Useful links

LD Online

<http://www.ldonline.org/index.html>

Learning Difficulties Australia

<http://www.ldaustralia.org/>

Remedial and Support Teachers' Association of Queensland

<http://www.pa.ash.org.au/rstaq>

Australian Association of Special Education Inc.

<http://www.aase.edu.au/index1.html>

The International Dyslexia Association (IDA)

<http://www.interdys.org/index.jsp>

Specific Learning Difficulties NSW

<http://www.speldnsw.org.au>

Australian Council for Educational Research

<http://www.acer.edu.au/>

This LDC Fact Sheet was compiled by Julia Starling, Speech-Language Pathologist & Member of Executive of the LDC Management Committee 2010 (updated 2015)

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