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## **What are Learning Disabilities, How are they identified, and What can be done about them?**

### What are Learning Disabilities?

*Bottom line:* A Learning Disability is identified when a person has a significant difference between his/her thinking abilities, education level, and performance in school.

One way to think of it is like a mountain range with lots of peaks that represent strengths in thinking or academic abilities alongside one or two specific valleys that represent the areas of weakness. Often these valleys are surprising weaknesses in an academic area because an individual is talented, capable, and/or skilled in other ways; these weaknesses result in unexpected underachievement in school. Everyone has their own pattern of strengths and weakness, but the weaknesses are much more significant for those with Learning Disabilities.

Learning Disabilities can affect a person's ability in the areas of: Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing, Math, Spelling, and Reasoning. A Learning Disability is not diagnosed when problems in school are most likely caused by lack of access to adequate education, medical problems, or general developmental delays. However, in some cases these may co-exist.

There are many terms used to describe Learning Disabilities, but some of the most common include dyslexia, dysgraphia, or dyscalculia. Other terms include Specific Learning Disorder in reading, writing, or math.

### When Should Testing for a Learning Disability be Considered?

If you have done all you can to help yourself or your child succeed, including getting tutoring or extra assistance to address specific problem areas, but the academic struggles continue then testing should be considered. Below are key signs that testing should be considered:

- Reading & Writing:
  - Slow reading, mispronouncing words, does not seem to understand or comprehend what is read
  - When reading aloud, the reading is choppy and has little inflection
  - Poor spelling or disorganized writing
  
- In Math, the student may have problems with:
  - Computations
  - Remembering math facts
  - Concepts of time and money
  - Visual problem-solving

In general, when someone is falling behind in one of these areas and seems unable to improve despite extra assistance, an evaluation should be considered. A thorough evaluation should also consider other factors, such as social, psychological, and emotional concerns that might be affecting the student as well.

### Are low intelligence and Learning Disability the same?

Definitely not! In fact, part of the definition of a Learning Disability is that the individual's academic problems are not due to low intelligence. Testing can help to identify whether this is a problem for the student and often is used to rule out low intelligence as the cause of the academic problem.

### Is ADHD a Learning Disability ?

Not exactly. ADHD affects a person's ability to sustain attention, focus on details, organize themselves, resist impulses, and to block out the noise of a situation in order to focus on the task at hand. Often there is also a tendency to become overly focused on really pleasurable activities (e.g., video games, tv shows, etc.). ADHD can certainly affect school performance in a similar way that Learning Disabilities do. However, the treatment approaches for these different but related conditions vary quite significantly. For example, medications are often found helpful in the treatment of ADHD but there are no medications for Learning Disabilities.

Given the very different treatment approaches for ADHD and Learning Disabilities, an evaluation can be especially helpful in deciding the best course of action.

### What can I do about a Learning Disability ?

Research shows that early interventions are the most successful. When children are identified in early elementary school there are more opportunities to intervene and address the problems. However, as we get older, accommodations to the classroom setting become an option for removing the barriers of the Learning Disability.

For example, a young child with a Learning Disability in reading will likely benefit from specific instruction in the areas of reading that are problematic, such as sounding out words. If a student has been provided extra assistance but they are now in high school or college, he or she may need extra time to complete exams or in-class assignments at school. They may know the material quite well, but would not be able to demonstrate this without additional time. Accommodations are about removing barriers to learning.

### Adults and Learning Disabilities - Should I get tested?

If you have always had a problem with reading, math, or writing then assistance might be available to you at work or in school. If you have a documented Learning Disability, you may be entitled to reasonable accommodations by your employer, under the American with Disabilities Act. Employers and schools typically require that the documentation be recent (within the past 3-5 years).

Typical work or academic accommodations for adults might include: extra time on tests or reading tasks; use of technology such as audio-books or text-to-speech computer programs to assist with reading problems; access to a calculator; or extra-assistance with organization.

### Where to find resources?

- National Center for Learning Disabilities: [www.nclld.org](http://www.nclld.org)
- Learning Disabilities Association of Washington: [www.ldawa.org](http://www.ldawa.org)
- International Dyslexia Association of Washington: [www.wabida.org](http://www.wabida.org)