



# Sunny Days

Psychotherapy . Counselling . Assessment

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## A helpful guide for Learning Disabilities

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### What is a learning disability?

A learning disability is an umbrella term for a wide range of learning problems. These problems can affect one or more of the ways that a person takes in, stores or uses information. Individuals with learning disabilities see, hear and understand things differently. This can lead to trouble with learning new information and skills, as well as putting them to use. These processing problems can interfere with learning basic skills such as reading, writing and/or math. They can also interfere with higher level skills such as organization, time planning, abstract reasoning, long-term or short-term memory and attention.

A learning disability is not a problem with intelligence or motivation. Individuals with learning disabilities are not lazy nor dumb nor lack the motivation to study. In fact, most people with learning disabilities are of average or above average intelligence. Their brains are simply wired differently, and this difference affects how they receive and process information. The level of severity and effects of learning disabilities vary from person to person. The most common types of learning disabilities involve problems with one or more of the following skills:

- reading (i.e. comprehension, decoding)
- written language (i.e. spelling, written expression)
- oral language (i.e. listening, speaking, understanding)
- mathematics (i.e. problem solving, reasoning, computation)

It is important to realize that learning disabilities can affect an individual's life beyond academics and can impact relationships with family, friends and within the workplace. Learning disabilities are a life-long condition; they cannot be cured or fixed, and they do not go away. However, with appropriate intervention and support, people with learning disabilities can overcome challenges and succeed in life, whether at school, at work, in relationships or in the community.



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## What are the causes of learning disabilities?

Learning disabilities are caused by genetic, congenital and/or acquired neuro-biological factors. These factors affect the development of the brain and may occur prenatally (before birth), during birth, or in early childhood. Learning disabilities can be caused by one or more of the following factors:

- **Prenatal and neonatal risks:** intrauterine growth restriction (poor growth in the uterus), premature birth, exposure to alcohol or drugs before being born (e.g. Fetal alcohol syndrome), complications during birth resulting in lack of oxygen to the brain
- **Family history and genetics:** a family history of learning disorders increases the risk of a child developing a learning disorder
- **Environmental exposure:** exposure to high level of toxins or radiation has been linked to an increased risk of learning disorders
- **Physical trauma:** a debilitating illness or injury in early childhood affecting brain development may increase the risk of learning disorders
- **Psychological trauma:** abuse, neglect and/or a lack of mental stimulation early in life may affect brain development and increase the risk of learning disorders

Learning disabilities are not caused by language differences, poor parenting, family problems, poor teachers or schools, or lack of motivation.

## Common types of learning disabilities

**Auditory Processing Disorder** – difficulty hearing differences between sounds

- Problems with reading, language, comprehension

**Dyslexia** – difficulty with reading

- Problems with reading, writing, spelling, speaking

**Dyscalculia** – difficulty with math

- Problems solving math problems, understanding time, using money

**Dysgraphia** – difficulty with writing

- Problems with spelling, handwriting, organizing ideas

**Dyspraxia (Sensory Integration Disorder)** – difficulty with fine motor skills

- Problems with balance, hand-eye coordination, manual dexterity

**Dysphasia/Aphasia** – difficulty with language

- Problems understanding spoken language, poor reading comprehension

**Visual Processing Disorder** – difficulty interpreting visual information

- Problems with reading, math, charts, maps, symbols, pictures



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## Red flags of learning disabilities

Learning disabilities look very different from one child to another. One child may struggle with reading and spelling, while another loves books but can't understand math. Still another child may have difficulty understanding what others are saying or communicating out loud.

It's not always easy to identify learning disabilities. However, some warning signs are more common than others at different ages. If you're aware of what they are, you'll be able to catch a learning disorder early and quickly take steps to get your child help.

### Age 3-5 signs

- Problems pronouncing words
- Trouble finding the right word
- Difficulty rhyming words
- Trouble learning the alphabet, numbers, colours, shapes, days of the week
- Difficulty following directions or learning routines
- Difficulty controlling crayons, pencils, and scissors or coloring within the lines
- Trouble with zippers, buttons, snaps or learning to tie shoes

### Age 5-9 signs

- Difficulty learning the connection between letters and sounds
- Unable to blend sounds to make words
- Confuses basic words when reading
- Consistently misspells words and makes frequent reading errors
- Trouble learning basic math concepts
- Difficulty telling time and remembering sequences
- Slow to learn new skills

### Age 10-13 signs

- Difficulty with reading comprehension or math skills
- Trouble with open-ended test questions and word problems
- Dislikes reading and writing; avoids reading out aloud
- Spells the same word differently in a single document
- Trouble following classroom discussions and expressing thoughts aloud
- Poor handwriting
- Poor organizational skills (i.e. bedroom, desk or homework is messy and disorganized)

## How are learning disabilities diagnosed?

Deciding if an individual has a learning disability is a several step process. There is no single test to diagnose for a learning disability, and many other problems, like anxiety, ADHD, stress at home, and intellectual disabilities, can have similar symptoms. One step of the process



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involves arranging a medical exam, including hearing and vision tests, to rule out other problems with symptoms similar to learning disabilities. A full psychoeducational assessment is conducted with children and teenagers to look at their cognitive, academic, and social-emotional functioning. During this process a structured clinical interview with the parent and child/teen is conducted to identify current areas of academic difficulty. A standardized assessment will be completed to assess their intellectual ability and cognitive skills; expressive and receptive language ability; underlying processing strengths and weaknesses; and academic achievement across a range of domains; assessed under different conditions (i.e. timed versus untimed). Behaviour ratings and checklists for are completed by the parent, child/teen and the teacher. An accurate diagnosis is necessary in the development of specialized interventions at school, home, community and workplace settings.

## How can I help?

It can be tough to face the possibility that your child has a learning disorder, as no parent wants to see their child suffer. You may wonder what it could mean for your child's future or worry about how they will make it through school. Perhaps you're concerned that by calling attention to your child's learning problems they may be labelled "slow" or assigned to a less challenging class.

The important thing to remember is that most kids with learning disabilities are just as smart as everyone else. They just need to be taught in ways that are tailored to their unique learning styles. By learning more about learning disabilities in general and your child's learning difficulties in particular, you can help pave the way for success at school and beyond.

I am here to offer you support and assistance. The sooner you move forward, the better your child's chances for reaching his or her full potential. If you suspect that your child may have a learning disability, I can conduct an assessment that will provide information on your child's overall abilities, in particular their learning style, information processing abilities, and academic skills. Following the assessment, I will provide you and your child with specialized recommendations and interventions that are suited to your child's needs. Based on these recommendations, your child's school can create an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) to support your child's learning.

If you see your child struggling, don't let anyone tell you to "wait and see" or "don't worry about it". Regardless of whether or not your child's problems are due to a learning disability, intervention is needed. You can't go wrong by looking into the issue and taking action.

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For more information regarding learning disabilities, visit:

Learning Disabilities Association of Canada: <http://www.ldao.ca>