

FACTS *for* FAMILIES

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Children with Learning Disorders

Parents are often worried when their child has learning problems in school. There are many reasons for school failure, but a common one is a specific learning disorder. Children with learning disorders can have intelligence in the normal range but the specific learning disorder may make teachers and parents concerned about their general intelligence. Often, these children may try very hard to follow instructions, concentrate, and "be good" at home and in school. Yet, despite this effort, he or she is not mastering school tasks and falls behind. Learning disorders affect at least 1 in 10 schoolchildren.

It is believed that learning disorders are caused by a difficulty with the nervous system that affects receiving, processing, or communicating information. They may also run in families. Some children with learning disorders are also hyperactive; unable to sit still, easily distracted, and have a short attention span.

Child and adolescent psychiatrists are aware that some of the long range consequences of learning disorders can be lessened with early intervention. However, If not detected and treated, they can have a "snowballing" effect. For instance, a child who does not learn addition in elementary school cannot understand algebra in high school. The child, trying very hard to learn, becomes more and more frustrated, and develops emotional problems such as low self-esteem in the face of repeated failure. Some children with learning disorders misbehave in school because they would rather be seen as "bad" than "stupid."

Frequent signals of learning disorders that parents should watch for in their child include the following:

- difficulty understanding and following instructions.
- trouble remembering what someone just told him or her.
- fails to master reading, spelling, writing, and/or math skills, and thus fails
- difficulty distinguishing right from left; difficulty identifying words or a tendency to reverse letters, words, or numbers; (for example, confusing 25 with 52, "b" with "d," or "on" with "no").
- lacks coordination in walking, sports, or small activities such as holding a pencil or tying a shoelace.
- easily loses or misplaces homework, schoolbooks, or other items.
- difficulty understanding the concept of time; is confused by "yesterday, today, tomorrow."

Generally, an important first step is to understand the child's learning difficulties and consider how they will affect their communication, self-help skill, willingness to accept discipline, impact on play and capacity for independence. Such problems deserve a

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comprehensive evaluation by an expert who can assess all of the different issues affecting the child. A child and adolescent psychiatrist can help coordinate the evaluation, and work with school professionals and others to have the evaluation and educational testing done to clarify if a learning disorder exists. This includes talking with the child and family, evaluating their situation, reviewing the educational testing, and consulting with the school. The child and adolescent psychiatrist will then make recommendations on appropriate school placement, the need for special help such as special educational services or speech-language therapy and help parents assist their child in maximizing his or her learning potential. Sometimes individual or family psychotherapy will be recommended. Medication may be prescribed for hyperactivity or distractibility. Parents need to consider the delicate balance between providing too much or too little assistance to their child to help them meet their educational goals. It is important to strengthen the child's self-confidence, which is vital for healthy development, and also help parents and other family members better understand and cope with the realities of living with a child with learning disorders.

For additional information see Facts for Families:

#6 Children Who Can't Pay Attention
#7 Children Who Won't Go to School
#33 Conduct Disorder

See also: *Your Child* (1998 Harper Collins) / *Your Adolescent* (1999 Harper Collins)

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