

Learning disorders: Know the signs, how to help

Learning disorders can make it hard for a child to read, write or do simple math. Understand the signs and what you can do.

By Mayo Clinic staff <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/learning-disorders/MY02259>

Many children who have learning disorders, also known as learning disabilities, struggle for a long time before being diagnosed. This can affect a child's self-esteem and motivation. Understand how to identify signs that might signal learning disorders and what you can do to help your child cope.

What are some common types of learning disorders?

A learning disorder is a disorder that affects a person's ability to acquire and use academic skills, such as reading and calculating. Learning disorders aren't the same as mental or physical disabilities, and don't reflect a child's intelligence. Instead, learning disorders affect a child's ability to complete a task or use certain skills, particularly in school.

The most common learning disorders include:

- **Dyslexia.** Dyslexia is a learning disorder characterized by difficulty reading, spelling and recalling known words.
- **Dyscalculia.** Dyscalculia is a learning disorder related to math concepts. Signs include difficulty solving even simple math problems or sequencing information or events.
- **Nonverbal learning disability.** This learning disorder is characterized by difficulty with nonverbal cues, such as coordination and body language.

Some children might have more than one learning disorder.

What causes learning disorders?

Factors that might influence the development of learning disorders include:

- **Genetics.** Some learning disorders, such as reading and math disorders, are hereditary.
- **Medical conditions.** Poor growth in the uterus (severe intrauterine growth restriction), exposure to alcohol or drugs before being born, and low birth weight are risk factors that have been linked with learning disorders. Head injuries might also play a role in the development of learning disorders.

- **Environmental exposure.** Exposure to high levels of lead has been linked to an increased risk of learning disorders.

What are the signs of learning disorders?

Identifying a learning disorder can be difficult. Your child might have a learning disorder if he or she:

- Experiences a delay in achieving a developmental milestone, while most other aspects of his or her development are normal
- Has difficulty understanding and following instructions
- Has trouble remembering what someone just told him or her
- Lacks coordination in walking, sports or skills such as holding a pencil
- Easily loses or misplaces homework, school books or other items
- Has difficulty understanding the concept of time
- Resists doing homework or activities that involve reading, writing or math, or consistently can't complete homework assignments without significant help
- Acts out or shows defiance, hostility or excessive emotional reactions at school or while doing academic activities, such as homework or reading

Seeking help for learning disorders

Early intervention is essential for a child who has a learning disorder. Learning disorders can snowball. For example, a child who doesn't learn to add in elementary school won't be able to tackle algebra in high school. Children who have learning disorders can experience performance anxiety, depression and low self-esteem — and lose motivation. Some children also might act out in an effort to distract attention from the real issue.

If you or your child's teacher thinks your child might have a learning disorder, consider having him or her evaluated by a child psychologist or neuropsychologist. Many schools also offer tests to identify learning disorders.

First, your child will likely undergo tests to rule out vision or hearing problems or other medical conditions. A psychologist or learning specialist will then use tests, as well as talk with you and your

child and look at your child's school history, to determine if your child has a learning disorder. In many cases, further assessment is needed to make a diagnosis.

Keep in mind that some children are naturally slower learners and might need time to develop reading, writing and math skills. Others, however, have disorders that affect their ability to learn.

Treatment options

If your child has a learning disorder, your child's doctor or school might recommend:

- **Extra help.** A reading specialist, math tutor or other trained professional can teach your child techniques to improve his or her academic skills. Tutors can also teach children organizational and study skills.
- **Individualized education program (IEP).** Your child's school might develop an IEP for your child to create a plan for how he or she can best learn in school. Find out if your state has legislation regarding IEPs.
- **Therapy.** Depending on the learning disorder, some children might benefit from therapy. For example, speech therapy can help children who have language disabilities. Occupational therapy might help improve the motor skills of a child who has writing problems.
- **Medication.** Your child's doctor might recommend medication to lessen the toll of a learning disorder. If your child has depression or severe anxiety, certain medications might help. Talk to your child's doctor about the risks and benefits.
- **Complementary and alternative medicine.** Some research shows that complementary and alternative treatments, such as music therapy, can benefit children who have learning disorders. Further research is needed, however.

Before your child's treatment begins, you and your child's doctor, teachers or therapists will set goals for your child. If, over time, little progress is made, your child's diagnosis or treatment plans might need to be reconsidered.

While learning disorders can cause long-term problems, there's hope. Early intervention and treatment can fully remediate some learning disorders. Family and teachers can also help children who have persistent difficulties achieve success in school, as well as in other areas of life.