

LEARNING DISABILITIES – A FACT SHEET

What is a learning disability?

The term learning disability has been used to describe a variety of problems in acquiring, storing, and/or retrieving information.

Students with learning disabilities receive inaccurate information through their senses and/or have trouble processing that information. Like static on the radio or a bad TV picture, the information becomes garbled as it travels from the eyes, ears, or skin to the brain.

This inaccurate sensory information, sometimes called perceptual problems, leads to difficulty in academic work. The student might have difficulty reading, writing, speaking, or listening. These skills have not been learned, have been learned after heroic work, or have been learned poorly.

The most commonly used definition is taken from The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, Public Law 94.142. It states:

The term "children with specific learning disabilities" means those children who have a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or do mathematical calculations. Such disorders include such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia and developmental aphasia. Such term does not include children who have learning problems which are primarily the result of visual, hearing or motor handicaps, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or environmental, cultural or economic disadvantage.

What are the problems associated with various learning disabilities?

Many handicaps come under the term learning disabilities. Following are those that most hinder academic performance.

Visual perceptual problems: Difficulty taking information in through the sense of sight and/or processing that information.

Visual figure-ground problems: Difficulty seeing a specific image within a competing background; for example, seeing the teacher's face when he or she stands in front of a blackboard with writing on it or picking out one line of print from other lines on a page. People who have this problem cannot see things that others can see. One line of print on the page appears to be missing.

Visual sequencing problems: Difficulty seeing things in the correct order, for instance, seeing letters reversed or seeing two knobs reversed on a machine. The person who has this problem actually sees the word incorrectly; he or she sees "was" instead of "saw".

Visual discrimination problems: Difficulty seeing the difference between two similar objects, such as the letters "v" and "u" or "e" and "c"; between similar chemical symbols; or between two types of leaves.

Auditory perceptual problems: Difficulty taking information in through the sense of hearing and/or processing that information. People with this problem frequently hear inaccurately. A sequencing or discrimination error can totally change the meaning of a message. For example, one might hear, "The assignment is due in May," rather than "The assignment is due today". People with auditory handicaps frequently do not hear unaccented syllables. They may hear "formed" instead of "performed", or "seven" instead of "seventy". Some auditory perceptual handicaps are:

- **Auditory figure-ground problems:** Difficulty hearing a sound over background noise, for instance, hearing the professor lecture when an air conditioner is humming in the room, hearing one bird chirp while other birds and insects are singing, or hearing someone talk at a party when music is playing.
- **Auditory sequencing problems:** Difficulty hearing sounds in the correct order, for instance, hearing "nine-four" instead of "four-nine"; hearing "law" instead of "wall", or hearing music garbled because the notes are perceived out of order.
- **Auditory discrimination problems:** Difficulty telling the difference between similar sounds such as "th" and "f" and "m" or "n", hearing "seventeen" instead of "seventy", or hearing an angry rather than a joking tone of voice.

Motor problems: Difficulty moving one's body efficiently to achieve a certain goal. Following are some motor problems:

- **Perceptual motor problems:** Difficulty performing a task requiring coordination, because of inaccurate information received through the senses. This may result in clumsiness, difficulty in participating in simple sports, and awkward or stiff movements.
- **Visual motor problems:** Difficulty seeing something and then doing it, such as copying something off a black board or learning a dance step by watching the teacher.
- **Auditory motor problems:** Difficulty hearing something and then doing it, such as following verbal directions on a test or taking notes in a lecture.

Intersensory problems: Difficulty using two senses at once or associating two senses; for instance, not realizing that the letter D that is seen is the same as the sound "D".

Handicaps Classified by Academic Difficulty

- **Dyslexia** --- Inability to read
- **Dysgraphia** --- Inability to write
- **Dyscalculia** --- Inability to do math

(A product of the EPIC Clearinghouse on Handicapped and Gifted Children)



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