



# National Center for Learning Disabilities

*The power to hope, to learn, and to succeed*

## LD at a Glance



Learning disabilities are real. A person can be of average or above-average intelligence, not have any major sensory problems (like blindness or hearing impairment), and yet struggle to keep up with people of the same age in learning and regular functioning.

### What is a learning disability?

A learning disability (LD) is a neurological disorder that affects the brain's ability to receive, process, store and respond to information. The term learning disability is used to describe the seeming unexplained difficulty a person of at least average intelligence has in acquiring basic academic skills. These skills are essential for success at school and work, and for coping with life in general. LD is not a single disorder. It is a term that refers to a group of disorders.

### How can one tell if a person has a learning disability?

Learning disabilities can affect a person's ability in the areas of:

- Listening
- Speaking
- Reading
- Writing
- Mathematics

Other features of a learning disability are:

- A distinct gap between the level of achievement that is expected and what is actually being achieved
- Difficulties that can become apparent in different ways with different people
- Difficulties that manifest themselves differently throughout development
- Difficulties with socio-emotional skills and behavior.

A learning disability is not a disease, so there is no cure, but there are ways to overcome the challenges it poses through identification and accommodation.

**Identification:** If there is reason to think a person might have LD, it is important to collect observations by parents, teachers, doctors and others regularly in contact with that person. If there does seem to be a pattern of trouble that is more than just an isolated case of difficulty, the next step is to seek help from school or consult a learning specialist for an evaluation.

**Accommodation and Modification:** Depending on the type of learning disability and its severity, as well as the person's age, different kinds of assistance can be provided. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997 and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 people of all ages with LD are protected against discrimination and have a right to different forms of assistance in the classroom and workplace.

For more information regarding specific accommodations, go to [Accommodations and Modifications](#).

## What causes learning disabilities?

Experts aren't exactly sure what causes learning disabilities. LD may be due to:

- **Heredity** - often learning disabilities run in the family, so it's not uncommon to find that people with LD have parents or other relatives with similar difficulties.
- **Problems during pregnancy and birth** - LD may be caused by illness or injury during or before birth. It may also be caused by drug and alcohol use during pregnancy, low birth weight, lack of oxygen and premature or prolonged labor.
- **Incidents after birth** - Head injuries, nutritional deprivation and exposure to toxic substances (i.e. lead) can contribute to LD.

Learning disabilities are NOT caused by economic disadvantage, environmental factors or cultural differences. In fact, there is frequently no apparent cause for LD.

Each type of strategy should be considered when planning instruction and support. A person with dysgraphia will benefit from help from both specialists and those who are closest to the person. Finding the most beneficial type of support is a process of trying different ideas and openly exchanging thoughts on what works best.

## Are learning disabilities common?

Currently, almost 2.9 million school-aged children in the US are classified as having specific learning disabilities (SLD) and receive some kind of special education support. They are approximately 5% of all school-aged children in public schools. These numbers do not include children in private and religious schools or home-schooled children.

Studies show that learning disabilities do not fall evenly across racial and ethnic groups. For instance, in 2001, 1% of white children and 2.6% of non-hispanic black children were receiving LD-related special education services\*. The same studies suggest that this has to do with economic status and not ethnic background. LD is not caused by economic disadvantage, but the increased risk of exposure to harmful toxins (lead, tobacco, alcohol, etc.) at early stages of development are prevalent in low-income communities.

For more information, go to [Learning Disabilities Fast Facts](#).

## What can one do about learning disabilities?

Learning disabilities are lifelong, and although they won't go away, they don't have to stop a person from achieving goals. Help is available if they are identified. Learning disabilities affect every person differently, and the disorder can range from mild to severe. Sometimes people have more than one learning disability. In addition, approximately one third of people with LD also have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD), which makes it difficult for them to concentrate, stay focused or manage their attention to specific tasks.

### LD and children

Early identification is vital in helping a child to succeed academically, as well as socially. If you think your child is displaying signs of a learning disability, share them with classroom teachers and others who come in contact with your child. Observe the way your child develops the language, motor coordination and social skills and behaviors important for success in school. And remember-early is better-even preschoolers can show signs of risk for LD.

Don't panic. Not all children who are slow to develop skills have LD. If your child does have a learning disability, early intervention with specialized teaching strategies can help to overcome difficulties. As a parent, it is important

to learn as much as you can and to help your child understand that he or she is not alone: other children struggle too, and adults are there to help

### **LD and adulthood**

It is never too late to get help for a learning disability. Finding out about a learning disability can be a great relief to adults who could not explain the reason for their struggles in the past. Testing specialists are available for people of all ages, and assistance is available for every stage of life. Taking the initiative to seek out support and services that can provide help is the first step to overcoming a learning disability.

Many adults (some of whom are unaware of their LD) have developed ways to cope with their difficulties and are able to lead successful, functioning lives. LD shouldn't hinder a person from attaining goals. Regardless of the situation, understanding the specific challenges and learning strategies to deal with LD directly at every stage can alleviate a lot of frustration and make successful living much easier.

For more information, go to [Audience Specific Overview: Adults and LD](#).

\* Executive Summary, National Research Council, 2001