

Learning Differences, Disorders and Disabilities:
Evolving Definitions and Perspectives
5-22-07

Defining a “Learning Disability”

National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities
American Psychiatric Association
State of Alaska Special Education Handbook (IDEA)

Notes:

Assessment Practices – changing focus

Response to Intervention (RTI): (evidenced-based)
Three Tiers – trying other interventions before
identifying a learning disability

From discrepancy models (ability/achievement) to
Intra-ability and intra-achievement differences and
Information processing models (cognitive fluency,
efficiency & speed)

Benefits of assessment

Access to services
Appropriate supports and interventions
Differential diagnoses
Anxiety
Depression
Asperger’s Disorder
Executive Skill Deficits
Secondary diagnoses
Adjustment Disorders including anxiety,
depression & conduct

Screening Tools and Recommendations for Parents

School services

Student Assistance, Intervention & Care Teams
School psychologists
ASD STeP Center – 742-3872

Community services

Eureka Learning & Educ. Consulting 677-2181
Educational Support Services 272-4407

PSYCHOLOGY RESOURCES

A professional corporation providing behavioral
health & educational support services

Herbert G.W. Bischoff, Ph.D.

Licensed Psychologist
Nationally Certified School Psychologist

(907) 272-4407

mypsychologyresources.com • fax: (907) 272-4463
2600 Denali St., Suite 302, Anchorage, AK 99503-2740

Definitions of **learning disability** on the Web:

- A disorder in basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or use mathematical calculations. The term includes conditions such as perceptual disability, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia.
www.healthychildrenproject.org/glossary/
- A condition that either prevents or hinders somebody from learning basic skills or acquiring information at the same rate as most people of the same age.
www.cmmc.nhs.uk/cancerinfo/glossary1.asp
- A severe difficulty in learning to read, write, or compute. Those with learning disability have a significant discrepancy between what is expected of them given their general level of cognitive ability and their actual reading, writing, or mathematical ability or achievement. They may also have significant listening or speaking difficulties. ...
www.nifl.gov/partnershipforreading/adult_reading/glossary/glossary.html
- He or she learns differently than most people. Learning is more difficult than it is for most people. It is diagnosed under four criteria:
www.siena.edu/studentaffairs/disabilities/disabilities_definitions.asp
- A specific difference in learning that leads to underachievement in school.
www.azspinabifida.org/gloss.html
- An individual with a learning disability has difficulty with the messages to the brain becoming jumbled, thus making it difficult for the individual to learn in one or more of the academic areas. People with a learning disability do not have mental retardation nor are they slow learner. They have an average or above-average intelligence. It is referred to as a hidden disability because there is no obvious physical disability. ...
www.eaglemountbillings.org/html/Disabilities%20Definitions.htm
- a disorder that affects people's ability to either interpret what they see and hear or to link information from different parts of the brain. These limitations are characterized by difficulty in reading, writing, and arithmetic.
www.luhs.org/health/topics/pediatrics/glossary.htm
- An extreme difficulty in the performance of a specific mental skill, such as reading or arithmetic which is inconsistent with the person's overall intelligence; sometimes linked to perceptual or memory problems. Not to be confused with Learning Difficulties. See also: Nonverbal Learning Disability.
access.autistics.org/resources/glossary/main.html
- any of a variety of disorders, including hyperactivity, dyslexia, and hearing problems, that can interfere with a person's ability to learn
www.american-depot.com/services/resources_gl_l.asp
- Was introduced by the Department of Health in 1991 to replace the term Mental Handicap. Described as "change of emphasis in the philosophy of care and in the values which form our thinking". The new term emphasises learning potential and equality of citizenship and "a commitment to thinking of people with learning disabilities as individuals in their own right".
www.geocities.com/kathheth/page6.htm
- learning disorder: a disorder found in children of normal intelligence who have difficulties in learning specific skills
wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn
- A learning disability exists when there is a significant discrepancy between one's ability and achievement. Usually this discrepancy equals a 1.5 standard deviation, typically 22 points between the IQ and an academic area such as math, reading, or written language. ...
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Learning_disability

Learning disabilities is a general term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual, presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction, and may occur across the life span. Problems in self-regulatory behaviors, social perception, and social interaction may exist with learning disabilities but do not, by themselves, constitute a learning disability. Although learning disabilities may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (e.g., sensory impairment, mental retardation, serious emotional disturbance), or with extrinsic influences (such as cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction), they are not the result of those conditions or influences (NJCLD, 1990, 1994c, p. 65). Specific learning disability is a chronic condition of neurological origin which selectively interferes with development, integration, and/or demonstration of verbal or non-verbal abilities. Specific learning disability exists as a distinct handicapping condition and varies in degree of severity. Throughout life, the condition can affect self esteem, education, vocation, socialization, and/or daily living activities.

Approved: Learning Disabilities Association Board of Directors, 2004.

National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities

Learning Disorders are diagnosed when the individual's achievement on individually administered, standardized tests in reading, mathematics, or written expression is substantially below that expected for age, schooling, and level of intelligence. The learning problems significantly interfere with academic achievement or activities of daily living that require reading, mathematical, or writing skills. A variety of statistical approaches can be used to establish that a discrepancy is significant. Substantially below is usually defined as a discrepancy of more than 2 standard deviations between achievement and IQ. A smaller discrepancy between achievement and IQ (i.e., between 1 and 2 standard deviations) is sometimes used, especially in cases where an individual's performance on an IQ test may have been compromised by an associated disorder in cognitive processing, a comorbid mental disorder or general medical condition, or the individual's ethnic or cultural background. If a sensory deficit is present the learning difficulties must be in excess of those usually associated with the deficit. Learning Disorders may persist into adulthood.

DSM-IV-TR American Psychiatric Association 2000

Specific Learning Disability

The child must exhibit a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations.

Note: LEAs are not required to consider whether a child has a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability when determining whether a child has a learning disability and permitting LEAs to use a response to research-based intervention as part of an evaluation process (20 USC 1414 b 6 A & B).

State of Alaska Special Education Handbook 2006-2007

SURVEY OF EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONS

THINKING (Metacognition)

	Never	Sometimes	Always
Plan			
I don't plan ahead for activities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I start tasks (cooking, projects) without the right materials.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have trouble prioritizing activities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Organize Materials			
I have trouble finding things in my room, closet or desk.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I don't pick up after myself.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have a messy closet.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Initiate			
I need to be reminded to begin a task even when I am willing.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have problems getting started on my own.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have trouble coming up with ideas for what to do with my free time.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Working Memory			
I have trouble with jobs or tasks that have more than one step.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I forget instructions easily	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have trouble remembering things, even for a few minutes (directions, phone numbers).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Task Monitor			
I make careless errors when completing tasks.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I don't check my work for mistakes.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have trouble finishing tasks (chores, work).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Self Monitor			
People say that I don't think before acting.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I don't notice when I cause others to feel bad.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
When people seem upset with me, I don't understand why.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

BEHAVIOR (Doing)

	Never	Sometimes	Always
Inhibit			
I have trouble sitting still.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have problems waiting my turn.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I make decisions that get me into trouble (legal, financial, social).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Shift			
I have trouble changing from one activity to another.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have trouble accepting different ways to solve problems.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am bothered by having to deal with changes.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Emotional Control			
I react more emotionally to situations than my friends.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I overreact to small problems.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My mood changes frequently.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

TABLE 1.1. Developmental Tasks Requiring Executive Skills

Age range	Developmental task
Preschool	<p>Run simple errands (e.g., “Get your shoes from the bedroom”).</p> <p>Tidy bedroom or playroom with assistance.</p> <p>Perform simple chores and self-help tasks with reminders (e.g., clear dishes from table, brush teeth, get dressed).</p> <p>Inhibit behaviors: don’t touch a hot stove; don’t run into the street; don’t grab a toy from another child; don’t hit, bite, push, etc.</p>
Kindergarten– grade 2	<p>Run errands (two to three step directions).</p> <p>Tidy bedroom or playroom.</p> <p>Perform simple chores, self-help tasks; may need reminders (e.g., make bed).</p> <p>Bring papers to and from school.</p> <p>Complete homework assignments (20-minute maximum).</p> <p>Decide how to spend money (allowance).</p> <p>Inhibit behaviors: follow safety rules, don’t swear, raise hand before speaking in class, keep hands to self.</p>
Grades 3–5	<p>Run errands (may involve time delay or greater distance, such as going to a nearby store or remembering to do something after school).</p> <p>Tidy bedroom or playroom (may include vacuuming, dusting, etc.).</p> <p>Perform chores that take 15–30 minutes (e.g., clean up after dinner, rake leaves).</p> <p>Bring books, papers, assignments to and from school.</p> <p>Keep track of belongings when away from home.</p> <p>Complete homework assignments (1 hour maximum).</p> <p>Plan simple school project such as book reports (select book, read book, write report).</p> <p>Keep track of changing daily schedule (i.e., different activities after school).</p> <p>Save money for desired objects, plan how to earn money.</p> <p>Inhibit/self-regulate: behave when teacher is out of the classroom; refrain from rude comments, temper tantrums, bad manners.</p>
Grades 6–8	<p>Help out with chores around the home, including both daily responsibilities and occasional tasks (e.g., emptying dishwasher, raking leaves, shoveling snow); tasks may take 60–90 minutes to complete.</p> <p>Baby-sit younger siblings or for pay.</p> <p>Use system for organizing schoolwork, including assignment book, notebooks, etc.</p> <p>Follow complex school schedule involving changing teachers and changing schedules.</p> <p>Plan and carry out long-term projects, including tasks to be accomplished and reasonable timeline to follow; may require planning multiple large projects simultaneously.</p> <p>Plan time, including after school activities, homework, family responsibilities; estimate how long it takes to complete individual tasks and adjust schedule to fit.</p> <p>Inhibit rule breaking in the absence of visible authority.</p>

(continued)

TABLE 1.1. (continued)

Age range	Developmental task
High school	<p>Manage schoolwork effectively on a day-to-day basis, including completing and handing in assignments on time, studying for tests, creating and following timelines for long-term projects, and making adjustments in effort and quality of work in response to feedback from teachers and others (e.g., grades on tests, papers).</p> <p>Establish and refine a long-term goal and make plans for meeting that goal. If the goal beyond high school is college, the youngster selects appropriate courses and maintains grade point average (GPA) to ensure acceptance into college. The youngster also participates in extracurricular activities, signs up for and takes Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SATs) or American College Tests (ACTs) at the appropriate time and carries out the college application process. If the youngster does not plan to go to college, he or she pursues vocational courses and, if applicable, employment outside of school to ensure the training and experience necessary to obtain employment after graduation.</p> <p>Make good use of leisure time, including obtaining employment or pursuing recreational activities during the summer.</p> <p>Inhibit reckless and dangerous behaviors (e.g., use of illegal substances, sexual acting out, shoplifting, or vandalism).</p>

Some Examples of Executive Skills

Subdomain	Definition	Dysfunction
Initiate	Beginning a task or activity	Has trouble getting started on homework or chores
Inhibit	Not acting on an impulse or appropriately stopping one's own activity at the proper time	Has trouble "putting the breaks" on behavior; acts without thinking
Shift/Transition/Flexibility	Freely moving from one situation, activity, or aspect of a problem to another as the situation demands	Gets stuck on a topic or tends to perseverate
Planning	Anticipating future events, settings goals, and developing appropriate steps ahead of time to carry out an associated task or action	Starts assignments at the last minute; does not think ahead about possible problems
Organization	Establishing or maintaining order in an activity or place; carrying out a task in a systematic manner	Has a scattered, disorganized approach to solving a problem; is easily overwhelmed by large tasks or assignments
Self-monitor	Checking on one's own actions during, or shortly after finishing, the task or activity to assure appropriate attainment of goal	Does not check work for mistakes; is unaware of own behavior and its impact on others
Emotional control	Modulating/controlling one's own emotional response appropriate to the situation or stressor	Is too easily upset, explosive; small events trigger big emotional response
Working memory	Holding information in mind for the purpose of completing a specific and related task	Has trouble remembering things, even for a few minutes; when sent to get something, forgets what he or she is supposed to get
Metacognition	The ability to stand back and view oneself in a situation asking "How am I doing? Or "How did I do it?"	Procrastinates, thinking task will get done later not realizing how much time and effort is needed to accomplish it.

LEARNING DISABILITY ASSESSMENT

Some Facts about Learning Disabilities

Learning disabilities affect different people in different ways.

Learning disabled individuals often have difficulties remembering, understanding, and/or expressing information.

Learning disabled students are often weak in at least one of the following areas:

- spelling
- written expression
- math computation
- reading comprehension
- problem solving
- organizational ability
- time management

What is a Learning Disability?

"Is it possible that I might have one?"

Many learning disabled individuals may have problems in the following areas:

READING

Poor comprehension & retention

Poor mastery of phonics

WRITTEN LANGUAGE

Multiple spelling errors, difficulties with grammar and sentence structure

Inability to copy accurately

ORAL LANGUAGE

Poor concentration & comprehension

Problems with correctly expressing ideas

MATHEMATICS

Number reversal & confusion with operations signs

Difficulty with sequencing or abstract concepts

ORGANIZATIONAL & STUDY SKILLS

Difficulties with oral or written instructions

Problems organizing work

Difficulties in organizing time



REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

Children's Books

All Kinds of Minds by Melvin Levine, MD (1992)

The Tuned-In Turned-On Book About Learning Problems by Marnell L Hayes (1994)

Using Your Head: A Children's Book About Effective Learning (Ready, Set, Grow) by Joy Witt Berry and Ernie Hergenroeder (1979)

Adult Resources

Building Thinking Skills by Howard Black

Building Thinking Skills: Primary by Warren Hill, Ron Edwards (1987)

Catching On (a series) by Valerie Anderson, Carl Bereiter, David Smart

Executive Skills in Children and Adolescents: A Practical Guide to Assessment by Peg Dawson and Richard Guare (2003)

From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development edited by Jack P. Shonkoff, Deborah A. Phillips (2000)

Master Skills (a series) by Carol Gerber

Teaching Children to Think by Robert Fisher (2005)

The Myth of Laziness by Melvin Levine

On-Line Resources for parents/teachers

www.allkindsofminds.org

www.idonline.org

www.pbs.org/wgbh/misunderstoodminds/index.html

schwablearning.org

On-Line Resources for students

www.allkindsofminds.org

www.sparktop.org

www.idonline.org

National Organizations

Children and Adults with Attention Deficit Disorder (CHADD)

Council for Learning Disabilities (CLD)

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), Division of Learning Disabilities (DLD)