



## Learning Disabilities

### ◇ Sara's Story ◇

When Sara was in the first grade, her teacher started teaching the students how to read. Sara's parents were really surprised when Sara had a lot of trouble. She was bright and eager, so they thought that reading would come easily to her. It didn't. She couldn't match the letters to their sounds or combine the letters to create words.

Sara's problems continued into second grade. She still wasn't reading, and she was having trouble with writing, too. The school asked Sara's mom for permission to evaluate Sara to find out what was causing her problems. Sara's mom gave permission for the evaluation.

The school conducted an evaluation and learned that Sara has a learning disability. She started getting special help in school right away.

Sara's still getting that special help. She works with a reading specialist and a resource room teacher every day. She's in the fourth grade now, and she's made real progress! She is working hard to bring her reading and writing up to grade level. With help from the school, she'll keep learning and doing well.

### ◇ What are Learning Disabilities? ◇

*Learning disability* is a general term that describes specific kinds of learning problems. A learning disability can cause a person to have trouble learning and using certain skills. The skills most often affected are: reading, writing, listening, speaking, reasoning, and doing math.

Learning disabilities (LD) vary from person to person. One person with LD may not have the same kind of learning problems as another person with LD. Sara, in our example above, has trouble with reading and writing. Another person with LD may have problems with understanding

math. Still another person may have trouble in each of these areas, as well as with understanding what people are saying.

Researchers think that learning disabilities are caused by differences in how a person's brain works and how it processes information. Children with learning disabilities are not "dumb" or "lazy." In fact, they usually have average or above average intelligence. Their brains just process information differently.

The definition of "learning disability" in the box below comes from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The IDEA is the federal law that guides how schools provide special education and related services to children with disabilities. The special help that Sara is receiving is an example of special education.

There is no "cure" for learning disabilities. They are life-long. However, children with LD can be high achievers and can be taught ways to get around the learning disability. With the right help, children with LD can and do learn successfully.

### IDEA's Definition of "Learning Disability"

*Our nation's special education law, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, defines a specific learning disability as . . .*

*" . . . 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, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia."*

However, learning disabilities do *not* include, ". . . learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage." 34 *Code of Federal Regulations* §300.7(c)(10)

### ◇ How Common are Learning Disabilities? ◇

Very common! As many as 1 out of every 5 people in the United States has a learning disability. Almost 3 million children (ages 6 through 21) have some form of a learning disability and receive special education in school. In fact, over half of all children who receive special education have a learning disability (*Twenty-third Annual Report to Congress*, U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

### ◇ What Are the Signs of a Learning Disability? ◇

There is no *one* sign that shows a person has a learning disability. Experts look for a noticeable difference between how well a child does in school and how well he or she *could* do, given his or her intelligence or ability. There are also certain clues that may mean a child has a learning disability. We've listed a few below. Most relate to elementary school tasks, because learning disabilities tend to be identified in elementary school. A child probably won't show all of these signs, or even most of them. However, if a child shows a number of these problems, then parents and the teacher should consider the possibility that the child has a learning disability.

When a child has a learning disability, he or she:

- may have trouble learning the alphabet, rhyming words, or connecting letters to their sounds;
- may make many mistakes when reading aloud, and repeat and pause often;
- may not understand what he or she reads;
- may have real trouble with spelling;
- may have very messy handwriting or hold a pencil awkwardly;
- may struggle to express ideas in writing;
- may learn language late and have a limited vocabulary;
- may have trouble remembering the sounds that letters make or hearing slight differences between words;
- may have trouble understanding jokes, comic strips, and sarcasm;

- may have trouble following directions;
- may mispronounce words or use a wrong word that sounds similar;
- may have trouble organizing what he or she wants to say or not be able to think of the word he or she needs for writing or conversation;
- may not follow the social rules of conversation, such as taking turns, and may stand too close to the listener;
- may confuse math symbols and misread numbers;
- may not be able to retell a story in order (what happened first, second, third); or
- may not know where to begin a task or how to go on from there.

If a child has unexpected problems learning to read, write, listen, speak, or do math, then teachers and parents may want to investigate more. The same is true if the child is struggling to do any one of these skills. The child may need to be evaluated to see if he or she has a learning disability.

### ◇ What About School? ◇

Learning disabilities tend to be diagnosed when children reach school age. This is because school focuses on the very things that may be difficult for the child—reading, writing, math, listening, speaking, reasoning. Teachers and parents notice that the child is not learning as expected. The school may ask to evaluate the child to see what is causing the problem. Parents can also ask for their child to be evaluated.

With hard work and the proper help, children with LD can learn more easily and successfully. For school-aged children (including preschoolers), special education and related services are important sources of help. School staff work with the child's parents to develop an Individualized Education Program, or IEP. This document describes the child's unique needs. It also describes the special education services that will be provided to meet those needs. These services are provided at no cost to the child or family.

Supports or changes in the classroom (sometimes called *accommodations*) help most students with LD. Some common accommodations are listed in the "Tips for Teachers" box on page 3.

*continued on page 4*



## Tips for Parents

- ❑ Learn about LD. The more you know, the more you can help yourself and your child. See the list of resources and organizations at the end of this publication.
- ❑ Praise your child when he or she does well. Children with LD are often very good at a variety of things. Find out what your child really enjoys doing, such as dancing, playing soccer, or working with computers. Give your child plenty of opportunities to pursue his or her strengths and talents.
- ❑ Find out the ways your child learns best. Does he or she learn by hands-on practice, looking, or listening? Help your child learn through his or her areas of strength.
- ❑ Let your child help with household chores. These can build self-confidence and concrete skills. Keep instructions simple, break down tasks into smaller steps, and reward your child's efforts with praise.
- ❑ Make homework a priority. Read more about how to help your child be a success at homework. (See resource list on page 4.)
- ❑ Pay attention to your child's mental health (and your own!). Be open to counseling, which can help your child deal with frustration, feel better about himself or herself, and learn more about social skills.
- ❑ Talk to other parents whose children have learning disabilities. Parents can share practical advice and emotional support. Call NICHCY (1.800.695.0285) and ask how to find parent groups near you. Also let us put you in touch with the parent training and information (PTI) center in your state.
- ❑ Meet with school personnel and help develop an educational plan to address your child's needs. Plan what accommodations your child needs, and don't forget to talk about assistive technology!
- ❑ Establish a positive working relationship with your child's teacher. Through regular communication, exchange information about your child's progress at home and at school.



## Tips for Teachers

- ❑ Learn as much as you can about the different types of LD. The resources and organizations on page 4 can help you identify specific techniques and strategies to support the student educationally.
- ❑ Seize the opportunity to make an enormous difference in this student's life! Find out and emphasize what the student's strengths and interests are. Give the student positive feedback and lots of opportunities for practice.
- ❑ Review the student's evaluation records to identify where *specifically* the student has trouble. Talk to specialists in your school (e.g., special education teacher) about methods for teaching this student. Provide instruction and accommodations to address the student's special needs. Examples include:
  - ✓ breaking tasks into smaller steps, and giving directions verbally and in writing;
  - ✓ giving the student more time to finish schoolwork or take tests;
  - ✓ letting the student with reading problems use textbooks-on-tape (available through Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic, listed on page 4);
  - ✓ letting the student with listening difficulties borrow notes from a classmate or use a tape recorder; and
  - ✓ letting the student with writing difficulties use a computer with specialized software that spell checks, grammar checks, or recognizes speech.
- ❑ Learn about the different testing modifications that can really help a student with LD show what he or she has learned.
- ❑ Teach organizational skills, study skills, and learning strategies. These help all students but are particularly helpful to those with LD.
- ❑ Work with the student's parents to create an educational plan tailored to meet the student's needs.
- ❑ Establish a positive working relationship with the student's parents. Through regular communication, exchange information about the student's progress at school.

Assistive technology can also help many students work around their learning disabilities. Assistive technology can range from "low-tech" equipment such as tape recorders to "high-tech" tools such as reading machines (which read books aloud) and voice recognition systems (which allow the student to "write" by talking to the computer).

It's important to remember that a child may need help at home as well as in school. The resources listed below will help families and teachers learn more about the many ways to help children with learning disabilities.

### ◇ Resources ◇

Cronin, E.M. (1997). *Helping your dyslexic child: A step-by-step program for helping your child improve reading, writing, spelling, comprehension, and self-esteem*. Roseville, CA: Prima. (Telephone: 800-726-0600. Web: [www.primapublishing.com/index.php](http://www.primapublishing.com/index.php))

Currie, P.S., & Wadlington, E.M. (2000). *The source for learning disabilities*. East Moline, IL: LinguSystems. (Telephone: 800-776-4332. Web: [www.linguisystems.com](http://www.linguisystems.com))

Hall, S., & Moats, L.C. (1998). *Straight talk about reading: How parents can make a difference during the early years*. New York: McGraw Hill/Contemporary. (Telephone: 877-833-5524. Web: <http://books.mcgraw-hill.com>)

Harwell, J.M. (2001). *Complete learning disabilities handbook: Ready-to-use strategies and activities for teaching students with learning disabilities* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). West Nyack, NJ: Center for Applied Research in Education. (Telephone: 877-762-2974. Web: [www.josseybass.com](http://www.josseybass.com))

Lerner, J.W. (2003). *Learning disabilities: Theories, diagnosis, and teaching strategies* (9<sup>th</sup> ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin. (Telephone: 877-859-7241. Web: <http://college.hmco.com/students/index.html>)

Lyle, M. (1998). *The LD teacher's IEP companion: Goals, strategies, and activities for LD students*. East Moline, IL: LinguSystems. (See contact information above.)

Mercer, C.D., & Mercer, A.R. (2001). *Teaching students with learning problems* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall. (Telephone: 800-282-0693. Web: [vig.prenhall.com](http://vig.prenhall.com))

Porterfield, K.M. (1999). *Straight talk about learning disabilities*. New York: Facts on File. (Telephone: 800-322-8755. Web: [www.factsonfile.com](http://www.factsonfile.com))

Silver, L. (1998). *The misunderstood child: Understanding and coping with your child's learning disabilities* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). New York: Three Rivers Press. (To find a local or online bookseller go to: [www.randomhouse.com/reader\\_resources/ordering.html](http://www.randomhouse.com/reader_resources/ordering.html))

Smith, C., & Strick, L.W. (1999). *Learning disabilities from A to Z*. New York: Simon & Schuster. (To find a local or online bookseller go to: [www.simonsays.com](http://www.simonsays.com))

Smith, S. (1995). *No easy answers* (Rev. ed.). New York: Bantam. (To find a local or online bookseller go to: [www.randomhouse.com/reader\\_resources/ordering.html](http://www.randomhouse.com/reader_resources/ordering.html))

### ◇ Organizations ◇

**Division for Learning Disabilities (DLD)**, The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), 1110 North Glebe Road, Suite 300, Arlington, VA 22201-5704. Telephone: 703-620-3660. E-mail: [cec@cec.sped.org](mailto:cec@cec.sped.org) Web: [www.dldcec.org](http://www.dldcec.org)

**International Dyslexia Association** (formerly the Orton Dyslexia Society), Chester Building, Suite 382, 8600 LaSalle Road, Baltimore, MD 21286-2044. Telephone: 410-296-0232; 800-222-3123. E-mail: [info@interdys.org](mailto:info@interdys.org) Web: [www.interdys.org](http://www.interdys.org)

**LDOnline** (Website Only)  
Web: [www.ldonline.org](http://www.ldonline.org)

**Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDA)**, 4156 Library Road, Pittsburgh, PA 15234-1349. Telephone: 412-341-1515; 888-300-6710. E-mail: [info@ldaamerica.org](mailto:info@ldaamerica.org) Web: [www.ldanatl.org](http://www.ldanatl.org)

**National Center for Learning Disabilities**, 381 Park Avenue South, Suite 1401, New York, NY 10016. Telephone: 212-545-7510; 888-575-7373. Web: [www.ld.org](http://www.ld.org)

**Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic**, 20 Roszel Road, Princeton, NJ 08540. Telephone: 609-452-0606. E-mail: [custserv@rfd.org](mailto:custserv@rfd.org) Web: [www.rfd.org](http://www.rfd.org)

**Schwab Learning** (Website Only)  
Web: [www.schwablearning.org](http://www.schwablearning.org)



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