



White Paper
Helping Children with Learning Disabilities

In this white paper, we provide an overview of learning disabilities, what to do if you suspect your child has a learning disability, your child's educational rights, modifications available to him or her, and tips for helping your child at home. We focus on helping adolescents and young adults through a variety of struggles, including, but not limited to learning disorders and any self esteem issues that may arise from them.

This white paper is written for parents, teachers, school counselors, or anyone needing advice on helping a child with learning disabilities.

Helping You Help Your Child

When children are having difficulties in school, parents are often the first to notice; however, knowing what to do, where to start, and where to find help can be confusing and overwhelming for many parents. If you suspect that your son or daughter has a learning disability, early recognition and diagnosis is key to getting your child the help he or she needs.

Learning disabilities are more prevalent than many think. According to the U.S. Survey of Income and Program Participation, an estimated 4.67 million Americans ages six and older have a learning disability. However, only 2.4 million students are diagnosed with specific learning disabilities, and receive services, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

As your child's advocate, it is vital that your son or daughter receives help early-on to develop the skills needed to learn based on their strengths and way of learning. Recognizing, accepting, and understanding your son or daughter's learning disability are the first steps to ensuring your child's success.

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What Is a Learning Disability?

A learning disability is a neurologically-based processing problem that may impair an individual's ability to listen, think, speak, write, read, spell, and do math. In addition to interfering with basic learning skills, a learning disability may also interfere with higher level learning skills, including organization, long or short term memory, attention, impulsivity and time management.

A learning disability is not a learning problem stemming from visual, hearing, or motor deficits. Learning disabilities however often coincide with other neurological disorders, such as Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

Learning disabilities often run in families, as they can have a genetic component. A learning disability is a lifelong obstacle; while children don't "grow out of it," they can learn skills to compensate for their learning disability. Early recognition, diagnosis, and getting proper help early on is key to your son or daughter's academic success.

Does My Child Have a Learning Disability? Know the Signs

The first step in getting help for your child is recognizing the signs of a learning disability. The following are some signs to look for in your child's cognitive and behavioral performance:

Cognitive Signs of a Learning Disability:

- Often spelling the same word differently in a single assignment
- Trouble with open-ended questions on tests
- Weak memory skills
- Difficulty in adapting skills from one setting to another
- Slow work pace
- Difficulty grasping abstract concepts
- Inattention to details
- Excessive focus on details
- Frequent misreading/misinterpretation of information
- Trouble filling out applications or forms
- Easily confused by instructions
- Poor organizational skills

Behavioral Signs of a Learning Disability:

- Not wanting to go to school
- Complaining about the teacher
- Reluctance to engage in reading/writing activities
- Saying the work is too hard
- Not wanting to show you schoolwork
- Avoiding assignments/homework
- Saying negative things about his or her academic performance, such as: "I'm dumb"
- Disobeying teacher's directions
- Frequent misreading/misinterpretation of information
- Cutting class and skipping school (in adolescents and teens)
- Bullying

If your son or daughter is displaying some of these cognitive or behavioral symptoms, it is time to take the next steps.

I Think My Child Has a Learning Disability. What Do I Do?

Once you suspect that your son or daughter has a disability and have recognized some signs of a learning disability in their behavior, it is time to take action:

1. Talk to Your Child's Teacher about Your Concerns

Share your concerns with your child's teacher; chances are, he or she may have noticed some of the same things you did. Use this opportunity to collect information about your child's academic performance and communicate openly about your son or daughter's performance.

2. Find Out about Pre-referral Services

Before you have your son or daughter formally evaluated, his or her school may have an established process for providing you and your son or daughter with support. Find out what your child's school can do or is doing for your child.

3. Keep Diligent Records of Your Child's Education

Keep your own notes on your child's academic development and meetings with their school's personnel. Additionally, be sure to add all communication about your child's academic performance from the school: test scores, report cards, and written comments from teachers. Keeping your son or daughter's academic records organized will help you and their educators monitor his or her progress and will be crucial for their evaluation.

4. Know Your Rights

Under the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA), you, as a parent, have a right to request a free, formal evaluation for your child. Once you make a formal request for evaluation, IDEA puts a set of legal requirements and procedures into motion for his or her school district.

5. Request for Formal Evaluation under IDEA

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) gives parents the right to request a free, formal evaluation of their child. If you decide to make a formal request for evaluation, ensure that you put your request in writing.

Your local school district is responsible for the IDEA-mandated formal evaluation, even if your son or daughter is home schooled or enrolled in private school. If your child is referred for evaluation by their school, you will receive written notice of the referral, and will need to give your consent in order to proceed with the evaluation.

Under IDEA, schools have several requirements once it has been established that your son or daughter will be evaluated by the school district. The law requires:

- ✓ You will be given a copy of the “Procedural Safeguards Notice,” which outlines your legal rights to ensure that your child receives the services he or she needs. This document is extremely important; be sure to read it carefully and know your rights as a parent.
- ✓ The school district is required to complete the evaluation within an established period of time; IDEA requires that the evaluation is conducted within 60 calendar days of receiving parental consent; however, timing guidelines may vary by states.
- ✓ The law sets certain requirements for evaluations. The evaluation must use a variety of scientifically proven procedures, strategies, and tools to examine each area in which a disability is suspected.
- ✓ The school must present you with the plan for your son or daughter’s evaluation before the evaluation begins.
- ✓ As a parent, you have the right to object to certain assessments or tests. In addition, you have the right to request that additional assessments or tests are added to the plan.

You also have the option to have your child privately evaluated, as opposed to having an evaluation facilitated by the school; however, if you choose to go with a private evaluation, the school is not responsible for the cost. As the parent, you have the right to choose whether or not to share the results of a private evaluation with your child’s school.

After your son or daughter’s evaluation, the school is required to provide you with a copy of the evaluation report. It is very important to request a copy of the evaluation report in writing.

My Child Has a Learning Disability. Now What?

Some parents get discouraged upon finding out about their son or daughter’s diagnosis; however, many individuals who have learning disability can succeed scholastically and professionally. The key to success is individualized instruction that is carefully targeted, well-delivered, and research-based.

In addition to individualized instruction, a strong support system and high expectation (of themselves and from others) are two key aspects to success. It is vital that, as a parent, you are an advocate for your son or daughter. In order to become an effective advocate for your son or daughter, you should become informed about their learning disability, their rights under the law, and ways to help him or her succeed.

What Laws Give My Child Educational Rights?

There are three federal statutes that you should familiarize yourself with. These laws guarantee your son or daughter's access to a *Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)*. The three federal laws include:

- *The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)* provides special education services for public school students ages 3 to 21 who have disabilities; however, having a learning disability doesn't automatically make a student eligible for special education. He or she must first go through an eligibility evaluation.
- *Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973* is a civil rights law prohibiting discrimination against people with disabilities in programs and activities which receive federal funding.
- *The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)* is a civil rights law that protects individuals with learning disabilities from discrimination in schools, the workplace, and other settings.

Once your child is formally diagnosed, he or she may receive an IEP or a 504 Plan; however, not all students who have disabilities require specialized instruction. Depending on your child's diagnosis, he or she may receive a specialized plan.

What Is an IEP?

IEP stands for an Individualized Education Program. An IEP is required under IDEA for every student who receives special education services to make sure that each student receives individualized instruction and services. The IEP is written for each student by a team, which includes his or her parents, classroom teacher, special education teacher, school psychologist, and a school district representative who has authority over special education programs.

What Is a 504 Plan?

A 504 Plan is designed for students who have been diagnosed with a learning disability or an attention deficit who do not meet the eligibility requirements under IDEA. Since Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 has a more expansive definition of a learning disability than IDEA does, students who do not meet the criteria to qualify for an IEP may be eligible to receive accommodations under a 504 plan. Like an IEP, a 504 plan is also a plan written specifically for each student to ensure his or her success in the classroom.

What Is the Difference?

For students who do require specialized instruction, IDEA controls the requirements, and an IEP is developed for that student. The program document is in-depth and outlines the child's present academic performance, annual academic goals, special services the child will receive, how the institution will track the goals, standardized testing protocol, accommodations, and modifications. The IDEA process requires documentation of measurable growth and specialized instruction.

504 plans are less involved, and are designed for students who do not require specialized instruction. While a team of at least five or six people are required to develop an IEP, a 504 plan can be developed among the child's parent(s) and teachers. They are designed to ensure the student receives equal access to public education and services. A document is usually created to outline their specific accessibility requirements and names of who will provide each requirement or accommodation.

What Is an "Accommodation"?

Accommodations are instructional or test adaptations that allow the student to demonstrate what he or she knows without fundamentally changing the targeted skill being taught in the classroom or measured during testing sessions. Accommodations do not reduce performance expectations; they simply change the manner or setting in which the information is presented, or how the student will respond.

Generally, many accommodations can be grouped into five categories:

- **Timing:** ex. giving extended time to complete a test item or task
- **Flexible scheduling:** ex. giving two weeks, rather than one to complete a project
- **Accommodated presentation of material:** material is presented for the student in a different manner than traditionally presented
- **Setting:** ex. completing a task or test in a quiet room
- **Response accommodation:** ex. allowing the student to respond orally to a written test

What Is a "Modification"?

Modifications are instructional or test adaptations that change the targeted skill and often reduce learning expectations. They may affect the content in such a way that what is being taught or assessed is fundamentally changed.

Modification may lower performance expectations by:

- Reducing the number of items required
- Reducing the complexity of the items or task required

How Can I Help My Child Succeed at Home?

There are many ways you can help your son or daughter succeed-- aside from being involved with their education plan and progress. Here are a some ways to help your child reach their full potential:

1. Educate Yourself about Your Child's Learning Disability

Find out as much as you can about your child's learning disability. Learn about what kinds of tasks will be difficult for your son or daughter, what resources are available to aid him or her in overcoming those obstacles, and what your can do to make learning easier for your child.

2. Use Your Child's Strengths to His or Her Advantage

Search for indications of how your son or daughter learns best, paying special attention to your his or her interests, talents, and skills. Use these strengths to help them learn in a way that is most enjoyable for them. For example, if your son or daughter has a hard time reading information, but can easily comprehend things when listening, take advantage of this. Allow your son or daughter to listen to a book on tape or watch a video to take in new information.

3. Use Media Constructively and Creatively

Television, videos, podcasts, and other forms of media can actually be learning tools. If you can help your son or daughter select valuable programming to watch or listen to, this can be a great use of time. By watching a video or listening to a podcast, your son or daughter can learn to carefully listen, focus, sustain attention, and increase their vocabulary.

4. Increase Your Child's Self Confidence

It is important to foster and grow your son or daughter's self confidence and maintain high expectations for him or her. While it is vital not to underestimate him or her, it is also important not to set unrealistic expectations. Rather than focusing on his or her shortcomings, focus on his or her strengths. In addition, make sure books are on your son or daughter's reading level. Many children with a learning disability are reading below grade level. Foster your child's love of reading, while making sure they do not become frustrated by ensuring that he or she is reading books on an appropriate level.

Conclusion

If you suspect your son or daughter has a learning disability, the best thing you can do is to get them the help necessary to be successful. Recognizing, accepting, and understanding your son or daughter's learning disability are the first steps to ensuring your son or daughter's success.

Being an advocate for your son or daughter involves being involved in the testing process, knowing which laws your child is protected under, and helping your child succeed in and outside of the school environment.

Resources

National Center for Learning Disabilities <http://www.nclld.org/>

U.S. Survey of Income and Program Participation <http://www.census.gov/sipp/>

National Center for Education Statistics <http://nces.ed.gov/>

The University of Washington Alliance for Students with Disabilities in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics <http://www.washington.edu/doit/Stem/articles?52>

Additional Resources

For additional resources on helping your child, please visit our website's resource section:
<http://aspiroadventure.com/parent-resources/suggested-reading/>



This white paper was sponsored by Aspiro Adventure, the pioneer of Wilderness Adventure Therapy. Aspiro Adventure offers safe, effective, and clinically-sophisticated treatment options for adolescents and young adults.

About Aspiro Adventure

Aspiro Adventure's Wilderness Adventure Therapy program was uniquely crafted to assist students and their families in creating lasting, life-long emotional changes through compassionate, intentional, research backed, and safe outdoor adventure therapy programs. The professionals at Aspiro Adventure understand individuals don't come with instructions, and every student is unique, capable, and amazing in their own right.

Aspiro Adventure focuses on helping adolescents and young adults through adolescents, young adults, and their families through difficulties that occur when various behavioral, cognitive, or developmental issues are present. Research shows that engaging individuals on a personal level with strategic and intentional activities will aid in developing the tools and skills necessary to engage life in a healthy and positive way.