



FACT SHEET

MARCH 2001

WHAT IS A LEARNING DISABILITY?

A learning disability is a disorder that affects a person's ability to either interpret what they see and hear or to link information from different parts of the brain. Although the individual with a learning disability has an average or above-average IQ, the disability becomes evident in both academic and social situations. The individual can have marked difficulties on certain types of tasks while excelling at others.

Learning disabilities may be divided into five categories:

1. Visual Problems: difficulty that the brain has with handling information that the eyes see. These are not conditions that will be eliminated by the use of glasses or contact lenses.

- poor visual memory (not remembering faces, words, people's names, reversals in writing (41 instead of 14),
- visual perception (difficulty in seeing the difference between similar objects such as b and d)
- figure ground discrimination (not being able to find the place to write your name on an application form)
- visual tracking (ability to follow a line on a page)

2. Auditory Problems: related to the processing of information that we hear.

- Auditory memory (difficulty in remembering what has been said)
- Auditory discrimination (trouble telling difference between similar sounds or words- for example, bee and pea or seventeen for seventy)
- Auditory sequencing (confusion with number sequence, lists, or directions)
- Auditory figure ground (trouble hearing sounds over background noises)

3. Motor Problems: related to various motor functions of the body.

- eye hand co-ordination (difficulties with handwriting, etc)
- small muscle control (misjudging where to place things)
- large muscle control (clumsiness, difficulties in certain physical activities)

4. Organizational Problems: poor ability in organizing time or space, or sequencing

- Poor ability to organize time (not meeting deadlines, being late or too early, poor sense of time).
- Poor ability to organize tasks (not understanding the steps required to carry out a particular task such as planning a party or a move).
- Poor ability to organize space (organizing a closet, desk, or laying out a page in a written document).
- Impairment of executive function (a person's ability to analyse things, apply information in a new way or adapt to new circumstances)

5. Conceptual Problems: understanding abstract concepts, complex language, consequences and social cues.

- difficulty in interpreting non-verbal language (such as facial expressions or body language).
- difficulty in understanding figures of speech (such as idioms, metaphors or similes)
- difficulty in anticipating the future (difficulty with predicting consequences, purchase something today with borrowed money, may do something impulsive without considering the consequences)
- Rigid thinking (unable to see that flexibility is required to deal with a situation, will not 'see' things in shades of grey but only in black and white).
- Poor social skills and peer relations (not maintaining eye contact during a conversation, using an inappropriate tone of voice or language, lacking the social graces)

Know Your Rights!

Parents need to know how and where to get appropriate information. Learn about your special education program and services, your rights and responsibilities as a parent of a child with special needs by requesting a summary of legal rights and services from your child's school, district/board.