



Learning Disabilities

Learning disabilities are differences in a person's brain that can affect how well they read, write, speak, do math, and handle other similar tasks. Different groups may define "learning disability" differently, often depending on the focus of the organization.

Having a learning disability, or even several disabilities, isn't related to intelligence. It just means that the person's brain works differently from others. In many cases, there are interventions—treatments—that can help a person with learning disabilities read, write, speak, and calculate just as well or better than someone without these disabilities.



NICHD and other federal agencies are looking into what causes these disabilities, how to identify them, and ways to treat them. The institute also studies typical learning processes and the effectiveness of different treatments for learning disabilities.

About Learning Disabilities

Learning disabilities affect how a person learns to read, write, speak, and do math. They are caused by differences in the brain, most often in how it functions but also sometimes in its structure. These differences affect the way the brain processes information.¹

Learning disabilities are often discovered once a child is in school and has learning difficulties that do not improve over time. A person can have more than one learning disability.² Learning disabilities can last a person's entire life, but he or she can still be successful with the right educational supports.¹

A learning disability is not an indication of a person's intelligence. Learning disabilities are different from learning problems due to intellectual and developmental disabilities (</health/topics/idds>), or emotional, vision, hearing, or motor skills problems.¹

Different groups may define “learning disability” differently, often depending on the focus of the organization. You can read more at the [U.S. Department of Education \(https://sites.ed.gov/idea/parents-families/\)](https://sites.ed.gov/idea/parents-families/), which provides statutes, regulations, and policies on the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act; the [Learning Disabilities Association of America \(https://ldaamerica.org/support/new-to-ld/\)](https://ldaamerica.org/support/new-to-ld/) ; and <https://www.understood.org> (<https://www.understood.org>) , which is maintained by the National Center for Learning Disabilities.

Types of Learning Disabilities


Some of the most common learning disabilities are the following:





- **Dyslexia.** People with dyslexia have problems with reading words accurately and with ease (sometimes called “fluency”) and may have a hard time spelling, understanding sentences, and recognizing words they already know.³
- **Dysgraphia.** People with dysgraphia have problems with their handwriting. They may have trouble forming letters, writing within a defined space, and writing down their thoughts.⁴
- **Dyscalculia.** People with this math learning disability may have difficulty understanding arithmetic concepts and doing addition, multiplication, and measuring.⁵
- **Apraxia of speech.** This disorder involves problems with speaking. People with this disorder have trouble saying what they want to say. It is sometimes called verbal apraxia.⁶
- **Central auditory processing disorder.** People with this condition have trouble understanding and remembering language-related tasks. They have difficulty explaining things, understanding jokes, and following directions. They confuse words and are easily distracted.⁷
- **Nonverbal learning disorders.** People with these conditions have strong verbal skills but difficulty understanding facial expression and body language. They are clumsy and have trouble generalizing and following multistep directions.⁸

Because there are many different types of learning disabilities, and some people may have more than one, it is hard to estimate how many people might have learning disabilities.

Citations



1. LD Online. (n.d.). *What is a learning disability?* Retrieved March 4, 2017, from <http://www.ldonline.org/ldbasics/whatisld> 

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3. International Dyslexia Association. (2008). *Dyslexia at a glance*. Retrieved March 4, 2017, from <https://dyslexiaida.org/dyslexia-at-a-glance/> 
4. National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke. (n.d.). *Dysgraphia information page*. Retrieved March 4, 2017, from <https://www.ninds.nih.gov/Disorders/All-Disorders/Dysgraphia-Information-Page>
5. Understood.org. (n.d.). *Understanding dyscalculia*. Retrieved August 24, 2018, from <https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/child-learning-disabilities/dyscalculia/understanding-dyscalculia> 
6. National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders. (2010). *Apraxia of speech*. Retrieved March 4, 2017, from <http://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/voice/pages/apraxia.aspx>
7. American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. (n.d.). *Auditory Processing Disorder in Children*. Retrieved June 24, 2020, from <https://www.asha.org/public/hearing/Understanding-Auditory-Processing-Disorders-in-Children/> 
8. Learning Disabilities Association of America. (n.d.). *Non-verbal learning disorders*. Retrieved March 4, 2017, from <https://ldaamerica.org/disabilities/non-verbal-learning-disabilities/> 

Video Text Alternative: Manage Your Learning Disability Be Your Own Advocate

To view the original video, please go to <http://www.nichd.nih.gov/health/topics/learning/conditioninfo/treatment/mld/Pages/default.aspx>
([/health/topics/learning/conditioninfo/treatment/mld/Pages/default.aspx#advocate](http://www.nichd.nih.gov/health/topics/learning/conditioninfo/treatment/mld/Pages/default.aspx#advocate)).

Video/ Graphics	Audio
<p>TITLE SLIDE:</p> <p>Manage Your Learning Disability</p> <p>Be Your Own Advocate</p> <p>HHS and NIH/<i>Eunice Kennedy Shriver</i> National Institute of Child Health and Human Development logos, and photo of a man smiling near a computer.</p>	
<p>Camera view of Dr. Brett Miller.</p> <p>BANNER: Brett Miller, Ph.D. Child Development and Behavior Branch, NICHD</p>	<p>Dr. Brett Miller: In terms of the sorts of skills that will help individuals with learning disabilities when they transition into—whether it’s adult employment or post-secondary skills, we have things like your ability to advocate for oneself, so knowing the sorts of setting that will optimally allow you to perform at your potential ...</p>

<p>(Edit/camera cut) Dr. Miller on camera.</p>	<p>Dr. Miller: ... you know, understanding yourself and knowing the sorts of challenges that you may face in—you know, if you have a reading disability, and quickly reading information—you know, being able to advocate for yourself to get the resources that would allow you to succeed. So in college, that might mean additional time for taking tests. That might mean access to, you know, software that would allow it to read aloud to you so that you could access larger volumes of text in a more efficient time manner ...</p>
<p>(Edit/camera cut) Dr. Miller on camera.</p>	<p>Dr. Miller: ... you know, these sorts of skills that allow you to advocate proactively for yourself so that you can optimally get the goals that you have set for yourself.</p>
<p>ANIMATION SLIDE:</p> <p>NIH/<i>Eunice Kennedy Shriver</i> National Institute of Child Health and Human Development logo. The words “For more information, visit www.nichd.nih.gov (/Pages/index.aspx)” appear.</p>	
<p>FADE TO BLACK SCREEN</p>	

Video Text Alternative: Manage Your Learning Disability. Ensure Your Surroundings Facilitate Success

To view the original video, please go to <http://www.nichd.nih.gov/health/topics/learning/conditioninfo/treatment/mld/Pages/default.aspx> (/health/topics/learning/conditioninfo/treatment/mld/Pages/default.aspx#surroundings).

Video/ Graphics	Audio
<p>TITLE SLIDE:</p> <p>Manage Your Learning Disability</p> <p>Ensure Your Surroundings</p> <p>Facilitate Success</p> <p>HHS and NIH/ <i>Eunice Kennedy Shriver</i> National Institute of Child Health and Human Development logos, and photo of a man smiling near a computer.</p>	
<p>Camera view of Dr. Brett Miller.</p> <p>BANNER: Brett Miller, Ph.D. Child Development and Behavior Branch, NICHD</p>	<p>Dr. Brett Miller: Being able to work with your employer—work with your school in order to, you know, have the resources necessary so that you can optimally achieve are going to be some of the key things that'll allow you to make transitions.</p>
<p>(Edit/camera cut) Dr. Miller on camera.</p>	<p>Dr. Miller: And so, for—particularly for individuals that might need greater supports, we would want to think about ways of continuing to structure the environment so that it facilitates their ability to succeed.</p>

<p>(Edit/camera cut) Dr. Miller on camera.</p>	<p>Dr. Miller: So we do it in software development; you can do it in terms of design for your office; you can do it in a range of ways. And—but the more general point of this is that—you know, thinking about the supports that you need over time in order to succeed—and that this is likely to be something that you’re going to need to think about over your life course.</p>
<p>ANIMATION SLIDE:</p> <p>NIH/<i>Eunice Kennedy Shriver</i> National Institute of Child Health and Human Development logo. The words “For more information, visit www.nichd.nih.gov (/Pages/index.aspx)” appear.</p>	
<p>FADE TO BLACK SCREEN</p>	

Video Text Alternative: Manage Your Learning Disability Take Advantage of Assistive Technology

To view the original video, please go to <http://www.nichd.nih.gov/health/topics/learning/conditioninfo/treatment/mld/Pages/default.aspx> (/health/topics/learning/conditioninfo/treatment/mld/Pages/default.aspx#technology).

Video/ Graphics	Audio
<p>TITLE SLIDE:</p> <p>Manage Your Learning Disability</p> <p>Take Advantage of Assistive Technology</p> <p>HHS and NIH/<i>Eunice Kennedy Shriver</i> National Institute of Child Health and Human Development logos, and photo of a man smiling near a computer.</p>	
<p>Camera view of Dr. Brett Miller. BANNER: Brett Miller, Ph.D. Child Development and Behavior Branch, NICHD</p>	<p>Dr. Brett Miller: There are a number of resources now that individuals with learning disabilities have available to them to help support their learning. So there are some groups that do auditory books. So you can imagine a couple of different ways of doing it. So there's approaches where the software reads the book to you.</p>
<p>(Edit/camera cut) Dr. Miller on camera.</p>	<p>Dr. Miller: There's also efforts to have individuals read text and record it.</p>

<p>(Edit/camera cut) Dr. Miller on camera.</p>	<p>Dr. Miller: For individuals with learning disabilities, the software tools are helpful in that you can often adjust the rate that the tools read to you. So if you're an individual that can have it read more quickly to you, you can adjust it up, so they can work through more text that way.</p>
<p>(Edit/camera cut) Dr. Miller on camera.</p>	<p>Dr. Miller: And in the case of writing, there's also systems that are developed that will facilitate your ability to generate sentences, to generate paragraphs, and to generate larger, you know, pieces of text for classrooms, because production is oftentimes a real challenge for those individuals. And there's ways and—ways to kind of structure information and ways that these systems are set up to facilitate this sort of generative process in writing, to help children and to help adolescents and adults be able to write more productively.</p>
<p>ANIMATION SLIDE:</p> <p>NIH/<i>Eunice Kennedy Shriver</i> National Institute of Child Health and Human Development logo. The words "For more information, visit www.nichd.nih.gov (/Pages/index.aspx)" appear.</p>	
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What are some signs of learning disabilities?

Many children have trouble reading, writing, or performing other learning-related tasks at some point. This does not mean they have learning disabilities. A child with a learning disability often has several related signs, and they don't go away or get better over time. The signs of learning disabilities vary from person to person.

Please note that the generally common signs included here are for informational purposes only; the information is not intended to screen for learning disabilities in general or for a specific type of learning disability.

Common signs that a person may have learning disabilities include the following:

- Problems reading and/or writing
- Problems with math
- Poor memory
- Problems paying attention
- Trouble following directions
- Clumsiness
- Trouble telling time
- Problems staying organized¹

A child with a learning disability also may have one or more of the following¹:

- Acting without really thinking about possible outcomes (impulsiveness)
- "Acting out" in school or social situations
- Difficulty staying focused; being easily distracted
- Difficulty saying a word correctly out loud or expressing thoughts
- Problems with school performance from week to week or day to day
- Speaking like a younger child; using short, simple phrases; or leaving out words in sentences
- Having a hard time listening
- Problems dealing with changes in schedule or situations
- Problems understanding words or concepts

These signs alone are not enough to determine that a person has a learning disability. Only a professional can diagnose a learning disability. (</health/topics/learning/conditioninfo/diagnosed>).

Each learning disability has its own signs. A person with a particular disability may

not have all of the signs of that disability.

Children being taught in a second language may show signs of learning problems or a learning disability. The learning disability assessment must take into account whether a student is bilingual or a second language learner. In addition, for English-speaking children, the assessment should be sensitive to differences that may be due to dialect, a form of a language that is specific to a region or group.

Below are some common learning disabilities and the signs associated with them:

Dyslexia



People with dyslexia usually have trouble making the connection between letters and sounds and with spelling and recognizing words.²

People with dyslexia often show other signs of the condition. These may include^{3,4}:

- Having a hard time understanding what others are saying
- Difficulty organizing written and spoken language
- Delay in being able to speak
- Difficulty expressing thoughts or feelings
- Difficulty learning new words (vocabulary), either while reading or hearing
- Trouble learning foreign languages
- Difficulty learning songs and rhymes
- Slow rate of reading, both silently and out loud
- Giving up on longer reading tasks
- Difficulty understanding questions and following directions
- Poor spelling
- Problems remembering numbers in sequence (for example, telephone numbers and addresses)
- Trouble telling left from right

Dysgraphia



A child who has trouble writing or has very poor handwriting and does not outgrow it may have dysgraphia. This disorder may cause a child to be tense and twist awkwardly when holding a pen or pencil.⁵

Other signs of this condition may include⁵:

- A strong dislike of writing and/or drawing
- Problems with grammar
- Trouble writing down ideas
- Losing energy or interest as soon as they start writing
- Trouble writing down thoughts in a logical sequence
- Saying words out loud while writing
- Leaving words unfinished or omitting them when writing sentences

Dyscalculia



Signs of this disability include problems understanding basic arithmetic concepts, such as fractions, number lines, and positive and negative numbers.


Other symptoms may include⁶:

- Difficulty with math-related word problems
- Trouble making change in cash transactions
- Messiness in putting math problems on paper
- Trouble with logical sequences (for example, steps in math problems)
- Trouble understanding the time sequence of events
- Trouble describing math processes

Citations



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What causes learning disabilities?




Researchers do not know all of the possible causes of learning disabilities, but they have found a range of risk factors during their work to find potential causes. Research shows that risk factors may be present from birth and tend to run in families.¹ In fact, children who have a parent with a learning disability are more likely to develop a learning disability themselves.² To better understand learning disabilities, researchers are studying how children's brains learn to read, write, and develop math skills. Researchers are working on interventions to help address the needs of those who struggle with reading the most, including those with learning disabilities, to improve learning and overall health.

Factors that affect a fetus developing in the womb, such as alcohol or drug use, can put a child at higher risk for a learning problem or disability. Other factors in an infant's environment may play a role, too. These can include poor nutrition or exposure to lead in water or in paint. Young children who do not receive the support they need for their intellectual development may show signs of learning disabilities once they start school.³

Sometimes a person may develop a learning disability later in life due to injury. Possible causes in such a case include dementia or a traumatic brain injury (TBI) (</health/topics/tbi>).⁴

Citations



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3. National Center for Learning Disabilities. (2014). *The state of learning disabilities: Facts, trends and emerging issues* (3rd ed.). New York: National Center for Learning Disabilities. Retrieved March 8, 2017, from <http://www.nclld.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/2014-State-of-LD.pdf>  (PDF 6.1 MB)
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How are learning disabilities diagnosed?

Learning disabilities are often identified once a child is in school. The school may use a process called “response to intervention” to help identify children with learning disabilities. Special tests are required to make a diagnosis.

Response to Intervention



Response to intervention usually involves the following¹:

- Monitoring all students’ progress closely to identify possible learning problems
- Providing children who are having problems with help on different levels, or tiers
- Moving children to tiers that provide increasing support if they do not show sufficient progress

Students who are struggling in school can also have individual evaluations. An evaluation can²:

- Identify whether a child has a learning disability
- Determine a child’s eligibility under federal law for special education services
- Help develop an individualized education plan (IEP) that outlines help for a child who qualifies for special education services
- Establish benchmarks to measure the child’s progress

A full evaluation for a learning disability includes the following³:

- A medical exam, including a neurological exam, to rule out other possible causes of the child’s difficulties. These might include emotional disorders, intellectual and developmental disabilities, and brain diseases.
- Reviewing the child’s developmental, social, and school performance
- A discussion of family history
- Academic and psychological testing

Usually, several specialists work as a team to do the evaluation. The team may include a psychologist, a special education expert, and a speech-language pathologist. Many schools also have reading specialists who can help diagnose a reading disability.⁴

Role of School Psychologists



School psychologists are trained in both education and psychology. They can help diagnose students with learning disabilities and help the student and his or her parents and teachers come up with plans to improve learning.⁵

Role of Speech-Language Pathologists



All speech-language pathologists are trained to diagnose and treat speech and language disorders. A speech-language pathologist can do a language evaluation and assess the child's ability to organize his or her thoughts and possessions. The speech-language pathologist may evaluate the child's learning skills, such as understanding directions, manipulating sounds, and reading and writing.⁶

Citations



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What are the treatments for learning disabilities?


Learning disabilities have no cure, but early intervention can lessen their effects. People with learning disabilities can develop ways to cope with their disabilities. Getting help earlier increases the chance of success in school and later in life. If learning disabilities remain untreated, a child may begin to feel frustrated, which can lead to low self-esteem and other problems.¹

Experts can help a child learn skills by building on the child's strengths and finding ways to compensate for the child's weaknesses.² Interventions vary depending on the nature and extent of the disability.

[Learn tips for managing a learning disability in adulthood.](#)
([/health/topics/learning/conditioninfo/treatment/mld](#))

Special Education Services

Children diagnosed with learning disabilities can receive special education services. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (<https://sites.ed.gov/idea/>) requires that public schools provide free special education supports to children with disabilities.³

In most states, each child is entitled to these services beginning at age 3 years and extending through high school or until age 21, whichever comes first. The rules of IDEA for each state (<https://ectacenter.org/sec619/stateregs.asp>)  are available from the Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center.

IDEA requires that children be taught in the least restrictive environment appropriate for them. This means the teaching environment should meet a child's needs and skills while minimizing restrictions to typical learning experiences.

Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)




Children who qualify for special education services will receive an Individualized Education Program, or IEP. This personalized and written education plan⁴:

- Lists goals for the child
- Specifies the services the child will receive

- Lists the specialists who will work with the child

Qualifying for Special Education

To qualify for special education services, a child must be evaluated by the school system and meet federal and state guidelines. Parents and caregivers can contact their school principal or special education coordinator to find out how to have their child evaluated. Parents can also review these resources:

- [The Center for Parent Information and Resources](http://www.parentcenterhub.org/) (<http://www.parentcenterhub.org/>)  offers information about [Parent Training and Information Centers and Community Parent Resource Centers](https://www.parentcenterhub.org/the-parent-center-network/) (<https://www.parentcenterhub.org/the-parent-center-network/>) .
- [IDEA Parent Guide](http://www.nclld.org/archives/reports-and-studies/idea-parent-guide-2) (<http://www.nclld.org/archives/reports-and-studies/idea-parent-guide-2>) 

Interventions for Specific Learning Disabilities

Below are just a few of the ways schools help children with specific learning disabilities.

*Dyslexia*⁵

- **Intensive teaching techniques.** These can include specific, step-by-step, and very methodical approaches to teaching reading with the goal of improving both spoken language and written language skills. These techniques are generally more intensive in terms of how often they occur and how long they last and often involve small group or one-on-one instruction.⁶
- **Classroom modifications.** Teachers can give students with dyslexia extra time to finish tasks and provide taped tests that allow the child to hear the questions instead of reading them.
- **Use of technology.** Children with dyslexia may benefit from listening to audio books or using word-processing programs.

*Dysgraphia*⁷

- **Special tools.** Teachers can offer oral exams, provide a note-taker, or allow the child to videotape reports instead of writing them. Computer software can facilitate children being able to produce written text.
- **Use of technology.** A child with dysgraphia can be taught to use word-processing programs, including those incorporating speech-to-text translation, or an audio recorder instead of writing by hand.

- **Reducing the need for writing.** Teachers can provide notes, outlines, and preprinted study sheets.

*Dyscalculia*⁷

- **Visual techniques.** Teachers can draw pictures of word problems and show the student how to use colored pencils to differentiate parts of problems.
- **Memory aids.** Rhymes and music can help a child remember math concepts.

Computers. A child with dyscalculia can use a computer for drills and practice.

Citations



1. Learning Disabilities Association of America. (2018). *New to LD*. Retrieved August 24, 2018, from <https://ldaamerica.org/support/new-to-ld/>
2. National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke. (n.d.). *Learning disabilities information page*. Retrieved March 9, 2017, from <https://www.ninds.nih.gov/Disorders/All-Disorders/Learning-Disabilities-Information-Page>
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What conditions are related to learning disabilities?

Children with learning disabilities may be at greater risk for certain conditions compared to other kids. Recognizing and treating these conditions can help a child be more successful.

Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder

Attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) occurs more frequently in children with learning disabilities compared to children without learning disabilities. A child with a learning disability who also has ADHD may be distracted easily and find it harder to concentrate.

An NICHD-supported study (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/28333510>) on reading disorders found that it is important to treat both the ADHD symptoms and reading problems. The findings show that although both disorders need separate treatments, these interventions can be done effectively at the same time.

Depression/Anxiety

A child with a learning disability may struggle with low self-esteem, frustration, worry, and other problems. Mental health professionals can help the child understand these feelings, learn ways to cope with them, and learn how to build healthy relationships.

3 Tips for Managing a Learning Disability in Adulthood

Support from schools can improve elementary and secondary students' math, reading, and other language skills. But how can people with learning disabilities prepare for the demands of university or working life?

Dr. Brett Miller directs the Reading, Writing, and Related Learning Disabilities Program within NICHD's [Child Development and Behavior Branch \(/about/org/der/branches/cdbb\)](#). In the video series below, he talks about tools, tips, and approaches that can help people manage their learning disabilities as adults.

Be Your Own Advocate



It's important to know and speak up for what you need. Understand your learning challenges, identify possible solutions, and ask for the resources that will allow you to reach your goals.

Manage Your Learning Disability: Be Your Own Advocate
<https://www.youtube.com/embed/kgwyBDk0RaM>

Read the [Manage Your Learning Disability: Be Your Own Advocate text alternative \(/health/topics/learning/conditioninfo/treatment/mld/Pages/mld-advocate-VTA.aspx\)](#).

Ensure That Your Surroundings Facilitate Success



Work with your school or employer to create a supportive learning environment, such as access to software that will help you succeed now and in the future.

Manage Your Learning Disability: Ensure Your Surroundings Facilitate Success
<https://www.youtube.com/embed/oLK5BU4jOY8>

Read the [Manage Your Learning Disability: Ensure Your Surroundings Facilitate Success text alternative \(/health/topics/learning/conditioninfo/treatment/mld/Pages/mld-surroundings-VTA.aspx\)](#).

Take Advantage of Assistive Technology



Use computer tools customized to your own pace and needs that can read text aloud, help you articulate your thoughts, and provide structure to your writing.

Manage Your Learning Disability: Take Advantage of Assistive Technology

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/lcvoKaquu24>

Read the [Manage Your Learning Disability: Take Advantage of Assistive Technology](#) text alternative

[\(/health/topics/learning/conditioninfo/treatment/mld/Pages/mld-technology-VTA.aspx\)](/health/topics/learning/conditioninfo/treatment/mld/Pages/mld-technology-VTA.aspx).

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