

## Specific learning disorders



In Australia it is likely that two to three children in each classroom will experience problems with learning. Many adults in various types of employment may also struggle with difficulties in reading, writing, spelling or maths. For people with a specific learning disorder, these problems cannot be explained by low intellectual ability, by another disorder, a lack of education, or a visual or hearing impairment. Each person experiencing a learning disorder is unique and will present with varying degrees of difficulty.

### What is a specific learning disorder?

A specific learning disorder can affect how people learn in a variety of ways including how they take in, remember, understand or express information. A specific learning disorder may be defined as problems people encounter in learning that affect achievement.

The most common forms of learning difficulties are in reading and spelling, but they may also be found in other areas including spoken language and mathematics. People who present with a specific difficulty in one or more areas usually also experience difficulties in other areas of learning. For example, a child who has a specific difficulty in reading and spelling is likely to have some difficulties with mathematics even though the level of difficulty may not be as great.

### Why does a specific learning disorder occur?

At this stage no one can say definitively why some people experience a learning disorder, and it is possible that there are multiple and varied causes. There may be a genetic component to some learning disorders, and there is now considerable evidence suggesting that certain parts of the brain may play a role.

### What are some of the signs?

Most commonly, either a parent or teacher first suspects a learning difficulty when a child is in the early years of primary school. However, there may be some signs of difficulty much earlier in development, especially if the learning disorder is

related to language and communication difficulties. Children are expected to reach certain milestones of development such as when they begin to crawl, walk and talk. The first sign of a learning disorder may be noticed by observing delays in the child's skill development around language, attention and learning in the early years. For example, children may show difficulties in understanding and following directions, or may have a short attention span or memory problems.

Learning disorders are not as obvious as physical disabilities. Individuals with learning disorders can become very good at covering up their difficulties so others do not notice. As a result, children with learning disorders may not be seen to be struggling until they have completed their first few years of school. By this time it is likely that they will have fallen significantly behind in their learning. Therefore, it is important if parents or teachers suspect that a child is experiencing difficulties in learning that the child is referred for detailed assessment earlier rather than later.

Identifying specific learning disorders in adults can be difficult, as individuals may display a wide range of learning and performance characteristics and have by then developed strategies for managing or covering up their difficulties. Adults with specific learning disorders are often unlikely to seek help themselves; instead concerns may arise as a result of a vocational assessment or other form of language-based evaluation, or finding an inability to read or write adequately for employment.

## Assessing for learning problems

It should be emphasised that not all children experiencing learning problems will necessarily go on to be diagnosed with a learning disorder. Some children mature more gradually and are slower in developing certain skills. However, given that any delay in development may put a child at risk of a wide range of problems, including social and emotional difficulties, it is important to have a full assessment of difficulties if learning problems are suspected.

While individuals experiencing learning problems can be identified by observing their behaviour and achievement, actual diagnosis of a specific learning disorder requires formal assessment conducted by a psychologist using standardised psychological and achievement tests. These tests compare the person's level of ability to that which is considered normal development for someone of that age.

The first step in this process involves ruling out other possible causes of the difficulties being experienced, such as a sensory problem (e.g., visual or hearing impairment), emotional disturbance (e.g., depression), environmental factors (e.g., cultural or economic disadvantage or a lack of access to adequate education) and intellectual disability. All of these can also have an effect on learning.

Once these other possible causes of learning problems have been ruled out and it is determined that the individual has a specific learning disorder, then the second step should involve a more detailed diagnostic assessment, again using standardised tests administered by a psychologist with appropriate training in assessing learning disabilities in children, adolescents or adults.

In some instances psychologists may seek input from other professionals, such as speech pathologists. This second step provides more detailed information regarding the person's strengths and difficulties in language and literacy and forms the basis of a treatment plan.

## How is a learning disorder treated?

People with a learning disorder can be shown strategies which build on their abilities and strengths and help them with areas of difficulty. As well as psychologists, other professionals such as speech pathologists and special educators are likely to be involved and should be working as a team (with schools and workplaces) to develop programs that will benefit the person.

Psychological treatment may also target non-academic difficulties that can sometimes occur alongside the learning difficulty. These may include behavioural problems such as disruptive behaviour in the classroom, social difficulties, and/or emotional problems such as anxiety and low self-esteem. People with learning disabilities are often excluded from peer groups and can be the victims of school and workplace bullying. Social skills training can help them to adapt and fit into their social environment.

## Possible outcomes

Outcomes for individuals with learning disorders vary depending on the extent of the difficulty as well as how it is treated. Research shows that, if untreated, a person with a learning disorder can experience a range of negative outcomes including academic failure, the development of disruptive behaviours at school, increased likelihood of school drop-out, unemployment, social difficulties, low self-esteem and depression.

However, with the right type of help and support many people can overcome their difficulties to the extent that they can go on to lead happy and successful lives.

It is important when seeking treatment options to consider only those interventions that are proven to be effective. There are a number of treatments for learning difficulties that are said to be effective but have no research evidence supporting them as effective treatments.

## Strategies that can help

- Parents, teachers and employers should aim to provide a quiet area for learning and working that is away from distractions.
- Material should be presented in small units, as individuals with learning disorders often have difficulty with long and detailed instructions but can process and follow smaller chunks of information.
- For learning disorders affecting reading and spelling, systematic training in phonics (linking letters with sounds) should be given to ensure that the person has adequate opportunity to develop these skills.
- Where possible, workloads and time frames should be adjusted to allow individuals to read the required information at their own pace and ensure they have enough time to spend on written information.
- Take care not to focus attention on the person's learning difficulty, for example by expecting a child to read out loud in front of the classroom.
- Schools and employers should allow alternative forms of presenting work other than in written form. Individuals or their families can often negotiate with the school or the employer to see if other forms of providing information are possible such as verbal presentations or oral examinations.
- If individuals are having problems with reading or spelling they should be encouraged to use a spellcheck or to have someone read through their written work.
- When teaching children with learning disorders, where possible make the tasks highly motivating by aiming them at the child's level of interest and understanding. This will promote persistence.
- Teachers should try to use examples and check that the child has understood.
- Avoid making negative comments such as labelling an individual as 'lazy' or 'stupid'. Explain instead that you understand the difficulties and provide a supportive environment.
- People with learning difficulties often experience low self-esteem and it is important to reward effort and any successes in any areas of their life, even if they are small.
- Develop non-academic areas of competence, such as sports, art or music that will provide the individual with a feeling of competence and promote self-esteem.

Remember that people with specific learning disorders have the capacity to learn despite their difficulty. Therefore, they should be treated as individuals who, with appropriate support, can achieve and make important contributions to society.

## Seeking help

If you are concerned about your child's development and learning, a psychologist may be able to help. Psychologists are highly trained and qualified professionals, skilled in diagnosing and treating a range of developmental issues.

If your child is referred to a psychologist by your GP, you might be able to get a Medicare rebate. You may also be able to receive psychology services via telehealth so you don't need to travel to see a psychologist. Ask your psychologist or GP for details. There are number of ways to access a psychologist. You can:

- use the Australia-wide **APS Find A Psychologist™** service. Go to [findapsychologist.org.au](http://findapsychologist.org.au) or call 1800 333 497.
- ask your GP or another health professional to refer you.

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