



Learning Disabilities and its Signs. How to Identify Learners with Learning Disabilities

Zamira Mërkuri, Blerta Xheko

“Eqrem Çabej” University of Gjirokastra (Albania)
z_merkuri@yahoo.com, blertaxheko@yahoo.com

1. Introduction

A learning disability (LD) is a disorder that affects a child's ability to interpret what he/she sees and hears or to link information from different parts of the brain. Learning disabilities are presumed to arise from dysfunctions in the brain. Individuals with learning disabilities have significant difficulties in perceiving information (input), in processing and remembering information (integration) and/or in expressing information (output). Outward manifestations of any of these difficulties serve as indicators or warning signs of a learning disability.

Some types of learning disabilities are:

- Reading disabilities (often referred to as dyslexia)
- Written language disabilities (often referred to as dysgraphia)
- Math disabilities (often called dyscalculia)

Dyslexia is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. A person with dyslexia can have problems in any of the tasks involved in reading.

Dysgraphia (difficulty in writing) involves several brain areas and functions. The brain networks for vocabulary, grammar, hand movement, and memory must all be in good working order. A developmental writing disorder may result from problems in any of these areas.

Dyscalculia (difficulty with mathematics) involves recognizing numbers and symbols, memorizing facts, aligning numbers, and understanding abstract concepts like place value and fractions. Any of these may be difficult for children with developmental arithmetic disorders, also called dyscalculia.

2. Warning Signs in Preschool Children

Although children's growth patterns vary among individuals and within individuals, uneven development or significant delays in development can signal the presence of LD. It is important to keep in mind that the behaviors listed below must persist over time to be considered warning signs. Any child may occasionally exhibit one or two of these behaviors in the course of normal development.

Language problems refer to slow development in speaking words or sentences. It's important to discuss early speech and language development, as well as other developmental concerns, with parents, teachers and specialists. It can be difficult to tell whether a child is just immature in his or her ability to communicate or has a problem that requires professional attention. Although problems in speech and language differ, they often overlap. A child with a language problem may be able to pronounce words well but be unable to put more than two words together. Another child's speech may be difficult to understand, but he or she may use words and phrases to express ideas. And another child may speak well but have difficulty following directions.

- Pronunciation problems

The most common speech deviation that parents notice is pronunciation. Some elements that a teacher or parent can notice are:

- a. The sounds he has problems with (i.e., sounds made with the lips, teeth, tongue, etc.)
- b. The position of those sounds in a word (initial, medial, or final)
- c. The frequency/consistency of misarticulating.

These observations can help you determine the severity of your child's speech problem and whether he is developmentally delayed in this area. Sounds which are made toward the front of the mouth (such as m, n, p, b, t, d) are the easiest to make. They are usually acquired first. Sounds requiring special placement of the tongue (l, r, s, voiced th) are the most difficult. Usually, sounds in the initial position of words are the easiest, followed by sounds in the final position. Consonants which appear in the middle of words are the most difficult. Consistently mispronounced sounds are a concern as the child gets older. However, if he pronounces a sound correctly some of the time, he may be moving toward standard pronunciation on his own. Most children develop standard speech by the age of six, although some children still have problems pronouncing the more difficult sounds at age seven or eight. Pronunciation problems may include stress, timing, articulation, intonation, rhythm through use of contractions, blends, flaps, pitch, inflections, linking (informal speech) etc.

- Difficulty learning new words



The child with a specific learning disability has trouble almost exclusively with the written (or printed) word. The child who has dyslexia as part of a larger language learning disability has trouble with both the spoken and the written word. These problems may include difficulty with the following:

- a. Learning new vocabulary that the child hears (e.g., taught in lectures/lessons) and/or sees (e.g., in books)
- b. Understanding questions and following directions that are heard and/or read
- c. Learning words to songs and rhymes

- Difficulty following simple directions

Difficulty with following directions is possibly one of the most common complaints. Reducing background noise, having your child look at you when you are speaking, and using simple expressive sentences, usually helps significantly. Speaking at a slightly slower rate and at a mildly increased volume may also help.

- Difficulty understanding questions

Dyslexia is one of the most usual learning disabilities that refer to difficulties related to using and understanding language. Children with dyslexia have difficulty processing and/or understanding information they hear or read because of the way their brains interprets and/or processes information. As a result, they may have problems speaking, listening, reading, spelling and/or writing, and understanding questions particularly questions involving 'how' and 'why'.

- Difficulty expressing wants and desires

Many children prefer to express themselves in more ways than just sitting and talking. Children with language learning problems may require other favored modalities to express themselves. Many children capable of verbal expression would often like to communicate in different ways and usually appreciate being offered various forms of expression. Painting, puppets, or other nonverbal means can be used to express themselves. If they are not provided with alternative means of expression, the unique voices of certain disabled persons may be silenced and may be excluded from any conversation about their unique, daily ways of being.

- Difficulty rhyming words

Difficulty manipulating sounds in words is one of the basic characteristics of reading difficulties and can be seen at a young age. Your child might struggle with rhyming, word games, or recognizing words that start with the same sound. Other signs characteristic to learners with learning disabilities are related to their motor skills and reflect difficulty with cause and effect, sequencing, and counting, trouble learning to tie shoes, button shirts, or perform other self-help activities, poor balance and memory for what should be routine (everyday) procedures, avoidance of drawing or tracing cognition, awkwardness with running, jumping, or climbing, difficulty with basic concepts such as size, shape, color, trouble memorizing the alphabet or days of the week, difficulty manipulating small objects, etc.

Attention also is an important element that should be taken into consideration when teachers or parents notice high distractibility, difficulty in changing activities, frustration, changes in social behavior, trouble in interacting with others, playing alone, unusual restlessness, impulsive behavior, extreme mood changes etc.

3. Warning Signs in Elementary School Children

It is during the elementary school years that learning problems frequently become apparent as disabilities interfere with increasingly demanding and complex learning tasks. Difficulties in learning academic subjects and emotional and/or social skills may become a problem. Children with learning disabilities at this stage exhibit a wide range of symptoms. These include problems with reading, mathematics, comprehension, writing, spoken language, or reasoning abilities. The primary characteristic of a learning disability is a significant difference between a child's achievement in some areas and his or her overall intelligence. Warning signs for this age group may include any of those listed above for preschool children in addition to the following.

As far as the language factor is concerned children with learning disabilities may exhibit one of the following: consistent errors in reading or spelling, trouble memorizing linguistic facts, confusion of signs, inability to retell a story in sequence, slow learning of the correspondence of sound to letter, difficulty remembering basic sight words etc.

Problems are visible even in reference to motor skills or social behaviors such as: poor handwriting attention and/or organization, poor concept of direction, difficulty copying from blackboard, rejection of new concepts, difficulty understanding facial expressions or gestures, difficulty understanding social situations, tendency to misinterpret others behavior etc.

4. Warning Signs in Secondary School Children

Some learning disabilities go undetected until secondary school. Physical changes occurring during adolescence and the increased demands of middle and senior high school may bring the disabilities to light. Previously satisfactory performance declines. Inappropriate social skills may lead to changes in peer relationships and discipline problems. Increased frustration and poor self-concepts can lead to depression and/or angry outbursts. Warning signs of learning disabilities in secondary school students include the following, which again, should occur as a pattern of behaviors, to



a significant degree, and over time. Secondary school children with learning disabilities show the following language signs: avoidance of reading and writing, tendency to misread information, difficulty summarizing, poor reading comprehension, difficulty understanding subject area textbooks, trouble with open-ended questions, continued poor spelling, poor grasp of abstract concepts, poor skills in writing essays, difficulty in learning foreign languages.etc.

As far as attention or organization and social behavior are concerned secondary school children show the following signs: difficulty staying organized, poor ability to double check work, trouble with test formats such as multiple-choice, slow work pace in class and in testing situations, difficulty understanding another person's perspectives, difficulty accepting criticism, difficulty resisting peer pressure etc.

Parents have the right to request an evaluation by the public schools to determine if the student has learning disabilities. Research has shown that the sooner LD is detected and intervention is begun, the better the chance to avoid school failure and to improve chances for success in life. When parents or teachers suspect a child has learning disabilities, they should seek evaluation.

5. Young learners with learning disabilities

Successful young learners with learning disabilities agree that developing knowledge about one's self, the nature of one's learning disabilities as well as one's personal and academic strengths and weaknesses are vital in getting ready for college. Students need to become familiar with how they learn best. Many successful students with learning disabilities acquire compensatory learning strategies to help them use the knowledge they have accumulated, to plan, complete and evaluate projects, and to take an active role in shaping their environments. They need to learn how to apply strategies flexibly, and how to modify or create strategies fluently to fit new learning situations. For example, compensatory strategies may include:

- allowing more time to complete tests, papers, and other projects,
- listening to audio tapes of text books while reading,
- Making up words to remind students to use the knowledge they have.

All learners learn from experience. Those with learning disabilities need to exercise their judgment, make mistakes, self-identify them, and correct them. Learning new information in a new setting, such as a college classroom or home, can be frustrating. Set-backs are an inevitable part of the learning process, but can impair self-esteem, which is essential to taking responsibility for one's life. Self-esteem is built and rebuilt one day at a time. Learners with learning disabilities need explicit strategies to monitor and restore their self-esteem and be aware of the extent of their disabilities and the strategies they can use in order to learn despite these disabilities.

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