LEARNING DISABILITIES: A PRIMER FOR PARENTS ABOUT IDENTIFICATION

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For parents of school-age children, particularly children who may not be doing well in school, the term learning disability (or, as is commonly referred, LD) is one with which they are likely to become quite familiar. The concept of LD has become a common and easily accepted one in the schools and beyond in recent years. Indeed, LD has become something that is now part of the fabric of our society and popular culture. After all, LD sounds so deceptively simple, so straightforward, and carries with it a quality that makes it serve as a perfectly reasonable and intuitive explanation for a child’s (or even an adult’s) learning problems.

Of all the children currently in special education programs in the United States (about 10% of the general population), more than half are identified as having LD. Children with LD are by far the largest group of all children with disabilities served in the schools. Estimates of the prevalence of LD in the general population range from 2 to 10%.

The purpose of this handout is to provide some basic information regarding the nature of LD in a manner that is understandable to parents. Making decisions about the education of their children is one of the most important responsibilities for parents, and having access to reliable and up-to-date information is essential for parents in making informed decisions.

Background

Learning disability and dyslexia. Early conceptions and definitions of LD revolved primarily around difficulties in learning to read, which produced another popular term, dyslexia. Dyslexia simply means abnormal reading or difficult reading. At one time, theories regarding the cause of dyslexia led people to believe that it meant seeing letters reversed, backward, or confused with one another, and that reading disorders were related to some type of problem interpreting visual information or symbols such as letters. Although the term dyslexia is not interchangeable with LD, this misconception remains common today even though research has shown that the vast majority of reading disorders are actually related to problems using auditory information.

Definition of learning disability. For parents, perhaps the most important definition of LD is the one provided in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (also known as IDEA), the law under which evaluations of LD and the provision of special education in the schools are governed. IDEA defines LD as “a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including such conditions as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia.” This definition is based on the concepts detailed in many previous definitions and contains the common elements that are generally characteristic of LD as seen in school-aged children.

Basic Facts

Identification in early grades. Perhaps the most important aspect of all definitions of LD is that it involves difficulties in learning. This may sound obvious, but it is an important point because it means that there must be a problem in a child’s ability to learn. Further, most definitions of LD make it clear that learning is generally most problematic and identifiable during the period of time when children are specifically taught and expected to learn to read, write, speak, or do math. This means that learning disabilities are usually first diagnosed in the primary grades (kindergarten through fourth or fifth grade). This is not to say that all learning disabilities are identified during this period. It is certainly possible that some children, particularly those with only mild learning problems, might not exhibit difficulties in
the primary grades that are severe enough to warrant the attention of the teacher, school, or parents. The implication, then, is that there needs to be some evidence of learning problems during the K–5 period for there to be the likelihood that the child has a LD. Adults or older children who encounter difficulties in school that begin in high school or college are probably not learning disabled, particularly if they have already been successful in developing and acquiring basic academic skills.

**Ruling out other explanations.** Another important aspect of the definition of LD is that the reasons for the observed learning problems cannot be caused by other factors such as those listed in IDEA, which states that, “the term does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.” For example, a child who is otherwise developing and learning normally might sustain a head injury that then results in difficulties in being able to learn to read. This would not be called LD but rather an acquired brain injury that, in turn, causes the learning problems.

Although LD was once referred to as “minimal brain dysfunction,” the problem is so mild that it cannot yet be seen even with today's advanced diagnostic equipment. Thus, although it is presumed that LD is caused by a problem in the way the brain processes information, no specific areas of the brain or its structures have yet been identified as the areas from which all types of LD originate. Because there is no lab test for LD, diagnosis is inferred by the presence of certain symptoms and behaviors that are observed in the learning process, as well as the absence of other more reasonable explanations for any learning problems.

**Concept of Discrepancy in Diagnosing Learning Disability**

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of the definition of LD is that the observed academic problems are greater than what might be expected based on the child’s intellectual ability. This would appear to be an assumption that would be rarely questioned because it seems to make the most sense. As noted previously, LD is generally not diagnosed in individuals who have mental retardation because it is expected that people with low cognitive ability will have problems learning to read, write, or do math. On the other hand, there is an assumption implicit in most definitions of LD that a child would be able to perform at a normal or average level consistent with his or her ability level were it not for the presence of LD. That is, children with LD are performing below their ability, intelligence, or potential.

Under the provisions of IDEA, decisions regarding the presence or absence of any disability as well as the provision of special education services is determined by a multidisciplinary team that, by law, must include the parents, a regular education teacher, an administrator, and all of the professional staff who have evaluated the child. The notion of discrepancy is reflected in IDEA, which states that “a team may determine that a child has a specific LD if two conditions are met: (a) “the child does not achieve commensurate with his or her age and ability levels ... if provided with learning experiences appropriate for the child’s age and ability levels” and (b) “the team finds that a child has a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability” in one or more areas of academic skills. The real problem in using this approach involves defining exactly what it means to be below the expected level of performance.

**Use and Misuse of Discrepancy Procedures**

**Determining discrepancy.** A great many methods have been suggested for determining what constitutes performance level below expectation, with the most common approach being the discrepancy model. There are different types of procedures that may lead to different results. The most common approach usually involves obtaining a measure of achievement in the affected academic area that is then compared to a measure that is intended to reflect the child's true ability level. This is usually accomplished with the administration of standardized tests. For example, a score from a test of reading decoding and comprehension would be compared to a score from a test of intelligence or cognitive ability (typically an IQ test) to look at the extent of the discrepancy between the two. Then the difference between the two scores is evaluated, and the degree to which the scores differ is examined. If the difference is great enough (that is, the achievement score is significantly lower than the score statistically predicted on the basis of the IQ), it is presumed that the child has a significant discrepancy between ability and achievement.

This procedure is common and although its use is not required by IDEA, most states have continued to use it as one of the criteria for identifying LD. However, because it appears to be an objective way to identify LD, this discrepancy method has been considered by some to be synonymous with LD; in many cases, LD is diagnosed solely on the basis of a discrepancy. However, this procedure may not accurately determine the existence of LD.

**Problems with discrepancy procedures.** Some of the main problems with the use of discrepancy models in LD evaluations include:

- Not all IQ tests are the same (some are more
verbally oriented while others rely heavily on nonverbal performance), and the use of an IQ score from one test may lead to results that are different from the use of an IQ score from a different test, making it extremely important to know exactly what is being measured with the cognitive test.

- The IQ is not always a true reflection of the level at which a child should be achieving in a specific area of school learning. That is, IQ only gives a general idea regarding a child's ability to achieve in school, not specifically, for example, in reading or writing.

- Different discrepancy methods may lead to different results, which makes it very important to consistently choose the same method to evaluate the ability/achievement discrepancy (some methods use simple differences between ability and achievement scores and other methods examine relative differences between similar groups of scores).

- In some cases, the tests of cognitive ability may not accurately measure the child's true ability owing to various factors such as cultural or language or economic differences and, therefore, may not determine the reason for the child's poor academic performance.

For these reasons, it is very important for the school psychologist to select cognitive tests that will best measure the child's ability. It is equally important for parents to realize that the identification of a discrepancy, regardless of its size, type, or manner in which it was derived, should be viewed as only one part of the process required for properly identifying and diagnosing LD.

Other important information that the parent and team should consider includes examining the student’s specific reading, language, math, writing, or spelling skills on other tests, the student's daily performance in the classroom, and how the student responds to changes in teaching.

Summary

As more and more is learned about learning disabilities, the manner in which it influences learning, the way it is defined, and the methods and procedures used to identify it are likely to change significantly. For example, there is a strong possibility that the entire notion of discrepancy, as part of the definition of learning disability, will be eliminated or modified in the next revision of IDEA (expected sometime in 2004). Such a change will significantly affect the way in which learning disability is identified. The fact that the definition and methods of identifying learning disabilities may change over time suggests that it may be difficult to determine with assurance which children have learning disabilities. Consequently, parents should be aware of recent developments because up-to-date information is extremely important in making informed decisions regarding the education of their children. The websites included in the "Resources" below provide information about learning disabilities as well as information about the latest developments in special education law.

Resources
For good information regarding the design of instruction to fit a particular child’s learning needs (with or without LD). A valuable resource in cases where children are struggling with the demands of school and where ideas are needed for designing an appropriate instructional program.

Websites
Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDA)—www.lda.org
A national organization dedicated to promoting the general welfare of children and adults with LD.

LDOline—www.ldonline.org
Offers assistance for parents, particularly in the area of treatment and services for children with LD.

National Association of School Psychologists, Center for Children and Families—www.nasponline.org
Has a variety of resource materials and links for parents about disabilities, parenting, education, and mental health. Search the full NASP website for information about IDEA, LD, and other topics.

Parent Advocacy Coalition for Educational Rights (PACER)—www.pacer.org
A comprehensive disability advocates’ site for parents and professionals, including up-to-date information about laws and regulations affecting individuals with disabilities and lots of resources to support children and families with LD, emotional behavioral disabilities, and other disabilities.

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