Learning Disabilities
Information, Resources, & Strategies to Help your Child Succeed

Prepared by Dr. Tracey Vieira, Psychologist
Psychology Department, Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB)
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What is a Learning Disability?

A Learning Disability is defined by the Ontario Ministry of Education \(^9,10\) as a learning disorder that is evident in both academic and social situations and involves one or more of the processes necessary for the proper use of spoken language or the symbols of communication.

The learning disorder is characterized by a condition that:

A) Is not primarily a result of:

- Impaired vision
- Impaired hearing
- A physical disability
- A developmental disability
- A primary emotional disturbance
- Cultural differences

B) Results in a significant discrepancy between academic achievement and assessed intellectual ability, with deficits in one or more of the following:

- Receptive language (listening, reading)
- Expressive language (talking, spelling, writing)
- Language processing (thinking, conceptualizing, integrating)
- Math computations

C) May be associated with one or more of the following diagnosed conditions:

- A perceptual handicap
- A brain injury
- Minimal brain dysfunction
- Dyslexia
- Developmental Aphasia
What is a Learning Disability?

In more general terms, "learning disabilities" refers to a range of difficulties that affects how easily someone can take in, retain, understand, organize, or use information. These difficulties result from having impairments in one or more psychological processes, alongside otherwise average to above average intellectual abilities. These processes can be sorted into eight main categories:

1. **Phonological Processing**: Detecting differences in sounds, retrieving information about sounds from memory, and decoding words efficiently.
2. **Memory & Attention**: Taking in, manipulating, and retaining visual and auditory information for a short or long period of time. Focusing on tasks and instructions while filtering out distractions.
3. **Executive Functions**: Problem solving, logical reasoning, creative thinking, and planning.
4. **Language**: Efficiently understanding and expressing verbal information (oral and written formats).
5. **Perceptual-Motor Processing**: Coordinating the brain and muscles for gross (sports) and fine (handwriting) motor tasks.
6. **Processing Speed**: Processing information quickly and accurately, and good hand-eye coordination.
7. **Visual-Spatial Processing**: Perceiving how parts come together as a whole, organizing belongings, and thinking with pictures (e.g., visualizing the steps in a process or images to accompany a story).

Learning Disabilities can vary both in severity and type; depending on which one (or combination) of these processes related to learning are impaired. A student with a learning disability may therefore face difficulties with oral language, reading, writing, and/or math tasks. Consequently, children with a learning disability often struggle to learn in the traditional way and at the typical rate of peers in their age group.
What are Non-Verbal Learning Disabilities?

Nonverbal learning disabilities are less common and less well known than language-based learning disabilities. Nonetheless, they present a unique challenge to parents, teachers, and the students who experience them.\textsuperscript{1,3}

Children with a nonverbal learning disability typically exhibit:

a) difficulties with math
b) problems with handwriting and spatially organizing words on a page
c) a large vocabulary
d) coordination difficulties
e) problems with visual-spatial organization
f) difficulty adapting to new and complex situations
g) a reliance on rote behaviors
h) trouble understanding non-verbal feedback (e.g., facial expressions, tones of voice, gestures) during social interactions
i) a distorted sense of time
j) tactile-perceptual deficits

In addition to struggling with some academic subject areas, a student with a nonverbal learning disability also struggles with athletic activities and social interactions. Additionally, due to their strong verbal skills, their deficits can be mistakenly interpreted as laziness, lack of motivation, or a poor attitude. The collection of difficulties faced by a child with a nonverbal learning disability can lead to social isolation, poor self-esteem, and serious emotional problems such as anxiety or depression.

Learning disabilities are generally life-long; however, their effects may be different over time depending on the "fit" between a student's environment and his or her needs. Moreover, there are supports and strategies that can be implemented to help students overcome these challenges and achieve their academic goals.
How does the TCDSB assess students' learning needs?

Students' learning needs are assessed via the following steps\textsuperscript{11, 12}:

1) Observation & Information Gathering
   Parents, teachers, or the principal notes that a student is experiencing difficulty in one or more areas at school. The concern may be related to academic, motor, language, memory, behavioral, social, or health functioning.

2) School-Based Support Learning Team (SBSLT)\textsuperscript{1} Involvement
   - If it is suspected that a student may require help or support to best meet his or her learning needs, a school-based support team (SBST) meeting is arranged. This meeting allows the principal, teacher, in-school specialists (e.g., special education teachers), and parents to gather for a discussion of how the student is functioning and whether some form of support is required to help the student become more successful at school. A student’s referral to an SBST meeting may result in a determination of necessary classroom supports, a recommendation for other specialized services (e.g., hearing or vision tests), ongoing monitoring of the student in class, or referral to a Joint Team (JT) Meeting.
   
   - During a Joint Team Meeting, members of the Special Services interdisciplinary team (assessment and programming teacher, psychology services, social work, and speech and language pathology) and the School-Based Support Team meet to discuss how the school can best program for a student’s needs. With parental consent, the team may make recommendations for a formal assessment or intervention (psychological, speech and language, social work, psychiatric, or occupational therapy) to identify and address the nature of a student's difficulties.

3) Psychological Assessment
   If a Learning Disability is suspected, the student may be referred for a psychological assessment conducted by a member of the psychology department. A psychological assessment examines academic functioning, cognitive abilities and information processing abilities (e.g., memory and language) to better understand a student’s learning style. It also typically involves interviews with parents and school personnel, a review of school

\textsuperscript{1} SBSLT is the SBST and the JT combined into one team.
records, and observation of the student in his or her classroom. If appropriate, a student’s social, emotional, and behavioral functioning is also explored as these factors can impact upon a student’s enjoyment of school as well as their academic development. This information allows the assessor to develop a comprehensive profile of how a student learns best and, where applicable, for a psychological diagnosis to be made. With parental permission, a student may be recommended for identification as an exceptional student with a Learning Disability only if he or she is diagnosed with a Learning Disability following a psychological assessment.

4) Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) Meeting
An IPRC meeting is the process through which the TCDSB can formally identify a student with a Learning Disability and initiate any recommended special education services. The committee consists of a Program Coordinator of Special Services and two interdisciplinary team members. The student’s parents, school staff members, and any TCDSB staff who have formally assessed the student are also invited to attend the meeting. Any formal assessment reports are reviewed, the student’s needs are discussed, and the committee generates recommendations. An initial IPRC summary form is then signed by all present. An IPRC review meeting is subsequently held annually to discuss the student’s progress and ongoing or changing needs. Formal identification and placement decision by IPRC is required for admission to an Intensive Support Program for students with a Learning Disability.
What terms should parents know?

The TCDSB provides various services to support the needs and learning styles of students with a Learning Disability. Elementary school programs are delivered in one of four placement options depending on the type and extent of a student’s needs: within the regular classroom with indirect support, resource support, or withdrawal support (i.e., withdrawal in a special education class for a portion of the day), or within an Intensive Support Program (i.e. a class for students with Learning Disabilities). Regardless of the placement selected for your child, there are a few terms that parents should familiarize themselves with.

- **Individual Education Plan**
  An Individual Education Plan (IEP) is a written plan that documents the special education program and/or services that are deemed necessary for a particular student. Within thirty days of identification by IPRC, teachers and in-school specialists must develop an IEP for the student. Parental input is valued, and parents will receive a copy of their child’s IEP. The student’s report card will reflect the subject areas in which evaluation or grades are based on the expectations outlined in the IEP. (An IEP may be developed for students with an LD diagnosis, not formally identified by IPRC.)

  An IEP includes:
  - An outline of the special education programming or services to be received.
  - General classroom accommodations
  - Specific educational expectations
  - Teaching strategies and resources
  - Assessment methods that will be used to evaluate or review the student’s progress
  - For students 14 years and older, a Transition Plan to appropriate high school and post-secondary education and activities

- **Accommodations:**
  Teaching strategies, supports, and/or services that are provided to help students meet learning expectations. Accommodations do not alter the provincial learning expectations for a grade; rather, they allow students to tackle grade appropriate tasks in a manner that addresses their particular strengths and needs. Examples of accommodations include extra time to complete assignments and tests, using assistive technology (computers, books on audiotape, etc.), a scribe, and oral evaluation.

- **Modifications:**
  Changes made to grade level expectations in one or more subject areas to meet a student’s learning needs. In other words, the academic expectations in a subject area may be drawn from a grade level either above or below the student’s current placement.
What should parents know about the transition to high school?

The transition to high school can be a challenging time for many students. As such, it is important that every effort is made to facilitate the continued implementation of necessary support services for a student with a Learning Disability when he or she transitions from elementary to secondary school.

The service delivery model in place at the elementary level is somewhat different from the options in a high school. The focus at the high school level is on accumulating the credits necessary to graduate; thus, resource support and accommodations are emphasized. Collaboration between the teachers in the subject areas that pose difficulty for a student with a Learning Disability and the school’s special education teacher is critical. Students continue to have an IEP that outlines the accommodations to be implemented by subject specific teachers. If necessary, an educational assistant or a peer tutor may also assist with the delivery of academic support.

As students become older, it is important that they are aware of their learning strengths and needs so that they can advocate for themselves and assume some responsibility for their own academic development. High school students with a Learning Disability should be encouraged to communicate with the Guidance department in their school to help foster their self-advocacy skills and ensure that they are on the right track with course selection and completion. Students should also access the Resource Room in their high school, which is a room where students with specific needs can access specialized services and staff who can help them to meet academic expectations.

Finally, it is wise for students with a Learning Disability to carefully plan the course of their high school education. For example, as many students with a Learning Disability benefit from the use of computers in the context of class work, it can be useful for them to check with their high school to determine whether they can earn their grade nine computer credit during the summer preceding their grade nine year. Additionally, a learning strategies course is typically available for grade nine students identified with a Learning Disability.
How can parents best advocate for their children?

Parents play a very important role in helping to ensure that their children receive the supports needed to promote academic, social, and emotional growth in school. For children identified with a learning disability, there are several strategies that can be utilized to become a strong advocate. 

- Recognize that the teacher and other school personnel share your goal of wanting your child to be successful.

- Gather all relevant paperwork (e.g., assessment reports, copies of report cards, doctors' records regarding hearing or vision tests) and keep them together in one file. If your child is getting re-assessed, or discussed in a review meeting, or he/she changes schools, or even when he/she begins a new academic year with a new teacher, you will be prepared with all relevant information and documents.

- Regularly discuss with your child how school is going to maintain your awareness of areas of ease and difficulty. Understanding children's experiences in school is an important part of being a strong advocate for their needs. More importantly, however, this will help to ensure that your child knows you are interested and supportive, and will increase the likelihood that he or she will come to you if problems arise.

- To be a strong advocate for your child’s educational needs, it is very useful to learn about the special education services available at his or her school and acquaint yourself with the people who play a role in planning for your child. Parents know their children best. The school will welcome your active involvement and ongoing communication.

- Communication between school and home is critical, both in terms of parent-teacher discussions regarding schoolwork and parent-school discussions regarding implementation of special education services or referrals for additional assessments. If you disagree with any of the school’s decisions or recommendations, you will have the greatest impact when your opinions are expressed in a composed and focused manner.

- Seek out support when you need it, either from other parents, school or TCDSB staff, or agencies with expertise in Learning Disabilities. Later in this document, you will find a list of resources that may prove helpful in this regard.
What strategies can parents use to support their children at home?

In addition to maintaining a close relationship with your child’s school and playing an active role in educational planning, there are several ways that you can also support your child’s learning needs at home², ⁶, ⁷, ⁸:

➢ It is important to pay close attention to your child’s self-esteem, as children who struggle with school work or progress more slowly than their classmates may not feel very good about themselves. Ensuring that your child understands that he or she learns differently and is NOT “dumb” or “stupid”, and is aware of his or her strengths and areas of ability, is crucial. Additionally, providing them with genuine praise for their efforts, even if they fall short of expectations, can go a long way towards bolstering self-esteem and motivation.

➢ When your child learns to view mistakes as opportunities to learn, rather than failures, subsequent challenges become less daunting. You can foster this resilience in your child by modeling how to review their work, problem-solve to obtain the correct solution, and use his or her strengths to mediate difficult tasks. Further, children are very perceptive and influenced by the reactions of their parents; thus, it is important to recognize that your feelings about your child’s performance can be communicated verbally and non-verbally.

➢ Helping your child to find areas of ability is also very important. Participating in an extracurricular activity in the community or at school that allows children to shine cultivates their feelings of competence and confidence. Similarly, assisting with chores or activities around your home can also allow your child to feel like a capable contributor.

➢ Children with a Learning Disability, and their parents, can greatly benefit from having realistic expectations and goals. If you adjust your expectations according to the nature and severity of your child’s Learning Disability, your child is less likely to feel frustrated or badly about their performance. It is important, however, to balance this adjustment of expectations with sending your child the clear message that success is attainable.

➢ Learning Disabilities are “invisible”, so parents are often cautioned by well-intentioned friends, relatives, or teachers not aware of the students’ difficulties not to provide too much help with their children’s schoolwork. It is therefore not uncommon for parents to struggle with the question of how much support is too much? Children with a Learning Disability often need considerable support to accomplish certain tasks. As such, parents should not feel bad when helping their children with homework, provided that their support is coupled with encouragement to subsequently attempt similar tasks with less intervention.

➢ Teaching your child to assume some responsibility for his or her own learning by recognizing when help is needed and asking for it provides a valuable skill that your child can carry throughout his or her school career.
Remember ...

Students with a Learning Disability can be very successful:

1. When they, their parents, and their teachers know what is difficult for them.

2. When they, their parents, and their teachers know what they can do well.

3. When they are provided with accommodations and strategies to support their learning, and, learn how to help themselves.

4. When they ask for, and receive, help.

5. When they know that they are capable of success and feel good about themselves.
RESOURCES – BOOKS & DVDS

Resource list obtained from Parentbooks
(416-537-8334; parentbooks.ca)

For Children:

The Alphabet War: a Story about Dyslexia. Diane Burton Robb

The Don’t-Give-Up Kid and Learning Differences. Jeanne Gehret

Regina’s Big Mistake. Marissa Moss

Sahara Special, EsméRaji Codell


Survival Guide for Kids with LD. Rhoda Cummings & Gary Fisher

Taking Dyslexia to School. Lauren Moynihan & Tom Dineen

What’s the Matter with Albert? The Story of Albert Einstein. Frieda Wishinsky

For Adolescents:

Applying to College for Students with ADD or LD. Blythe Grossberg

College Success for Students with Learning Disabilities. Cynthia Simpson & Vicky Spencer

The Survival Guide for Teenagers with LD. Rhoda Cummings & Gary Fisher

For Parents:

Attention Deficit Disorder and Learning Disabilities: Realities, Myths and Controversial Treatments. Barbara Ingersoll & Sam Goldstein

Copy This! Lessons from a Hyperactive Dyslexic Who Turned a Bright Idea Into One of America’s Best Companies. Paul Orfalea & Ann Marsh


Helping Children Overcome Learning Difficulties. Jerome Rossner

How Difficult Can This Be? Understanding Learning Disabilities — the F.A.T. City Workshop. Richard Lavoie, DVD

It’s So Much Work to Be Your Friend: Helping the Child with Learning Disabilities Find Social Success. Richard Lavoie, Book & DVD

Last One Picked — First One Picked On: Social Implications of Learning Disabilities. Richard Lavoie, DVD

The Motivation Breakthrough – 6 Secrets to Turning On the Tuned Out Child, Richard LaVoie, Book & DVD


Overcoming Dyslexia: A New and Complete Science-Based Program for Reading Problems at Any Level. Sally Shaywitz

The Resistant Learner: Helping your Child Knock Down the Barriers to Success. Lawrence J. Greene

Study Strategies for Early School Success—for Grades 3-6. Sandi Sirotowitz et al.

Study Strategies Made Easy: a Practical Plan for School Success. Leslie Davis & Sandi Sirotowitz, Book & DVD
**TCDSB RESOURCES**

TCDSB: An Accountability for Program Review (description of LD programs)  
[http://www.tcdsb.org/ProgramsServices/SpecialEducation/SpecialEducationPlan/ProgramReview/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.tcdsb.org/ProgramsServices/SpecialEducation/SpecialEducationPlan/ProgramReview/Pages/default.aspx)

LD brochures

Empower Reading brochure

Lessons Learned: Stories of Learning Disabilities, Resilience and Mental Health (DVD)  
[http://www.tcdsb.org/ProgramsServices/SpecialEducation/psychology/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.tcdsb.org/ProgramsServices/SpecialEducation/psychology/Pages/default.aspx)

Psychology Department Newsletters  
[http://www.tcdsb.org/ProgramsServices/BoardServices/psychologialservices/newsletters/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.tcdsb.org/ProgramsServices/BoardServices/psychologialservices/newsletters/Pages/default.aspx)
RESOURCES - WEBSITES AND SUPPORT SERVICES

Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario
www.ldao.ca

Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario - Toronto District
www.ldatd.on.ca

Learning Disabilities Association of Canada
www.ldac-acta.ca

Nonverbal Learning Disabilities on the Web
www.nldontheweb.org

LD-Online - An interactive guide to learning disabilities for parents, teachers, and children.
www.ldonline.org

National Centre for Learning Disabilities
www.ncld.org

Integra - A children's mental health centre in Toronto dedicated to helping children and adolescents experiencing social, emotional, or behavioral difficulties related to their learning disability.
www.integra.on.ca

Learning Disabilities Resource Community
http://www.ldrc.ca/

L.D. Self-Advocacy Manual: Uncovering the Mysteries of Your Learning Disability
http://www.ldpride.net/selfadvocacy.htm

Youth 2 Youth: A Canadian site, created by Cambrian College, for high school and post-secondary students with learning disabilities.
http://www.youth2youth.ca/
REFERENCES


3 Integra: *TIPS Nonverbal Learning Disabilities.* www.integra.on.ca/NLD.pdf


10 TCDSB. *Parent Guide To Special Education* http://www.tcdsb.org/ProgramsServices/SpecialEducation/ParentsGuide/Pages/default.aspx

11 TCDSB. *Section 2: Provision of special education programs and services within TCDSB.* Special Education Manual Secondary and Elementary Version 11.

12 TCDSB. *Special Education Plan.* http://www.tcdsb.org/ProgramsServices/SpecialEducation/SpecialEducationPlan/Pages/default.aspx

*Please note that a few of the references listed above were utilized in the production of the original version of this document and are no longer accessible.*
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