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Could My Child Have a Learning Disability?

By Sandy Gauvin

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Before my daughter, Michele, began attending school, a lady that was babysitting her noticed things she did (or didn't do) that weren't developmentally quite right.

We were fortunate in that the babysitter had had training in early childhood education, and she would work with Michele and her son to help them develop appropriate pre-school skills. She became concerned that Michele struggled with learning her alphabet and her numbers. Her small motor skills – things like using scissors and coloring – weren't up to par. She would overreact to many situations, and she didn't understand jokes because she didn't understand words with different meanings.

We weren't surprised when she was recommended in first grade to be evaluated for a learning disability.

I have taught hundreds of children with learning disabilities, and all of them had different combinations of signs. Some of the younger children just couldn't remember what sound(s) each letter or combination of letters made. Some couldn't figure out what certain numbers added up to, or they couldn't remember their subtraction, multiplication, or division facts, even though they tried and tried to memorize them.

Many of the kids, both younger and older, like Michele, could read words on a page very well, but they had difficulty understanding what they read. Then there were others who had to have help reading the words, but once they read them, they had no trouble understanding. There were some who were great readers and writers, but they had an awful time with math. And there were some who could do math better than I could, but they had a terrible time with reading.

One thing a majority of them struggled with was organizational skills. They were always losing things – notebooks, pencils, coats, assignments, anything they could possibly lose. Their lockers looked like tornadoes had gone through them. And I heard from the parents that their bedrooms were the same story.

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Too many of the students that I taught tried to avoid reading and writing because it was so difficult for them. It was a common practice for me to help them read tests because they 1) couldn't read the words, or 2) didn't understand either the question or the multiple choice answers they were given.

Notetaking was always difficult for Michele. She couldn't get the notes from the chalkboard, overhead, or even her textbook onto her paper. She had to have help in her classrooms so she could work around this problem.

Everyone has problems with something. But when these problems interfere with your child's education, and they are not showing the improvement they should be showing, it is time to consider getting him evaluated.

For more on having your child evaluated, read "To test or not to test" at LDPerspectives.com

Sandy Gauvin is a retired educator who has seen learning disabilities from many perspectives – as the parent of a daughter with learning disabilities, as the teacher of children with learning disabilities, and as an advocate for others who have diagnosed and unrecognized learning disabilities. Sandy shares her wisdom and her resources at www.LDPerspectives.com

Just What Is a Learning Disability, Anyway?

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A learning disability is defined as a permanent problem that affects a person with average to above average intelligence, in the way that he/she receives, stores, and processes information.

There are many wrong ideas out there about learning disabilities.

1) A learning disability will go away in time.

Unfortunately, this is not true. The good news is, you can learn ways to get around the problem. For example, kids who have trouble taking notes in class, like Michele did, can record the class on audiotape. Or, other students can make copies of the notes they have taken for them. The teacher can make copies the notes they are lecturing from. Or, when the notes are written down on an overhead transparency during the lecture, they can be copied after class and given to the student.

For children who have trouble reading, tapes of many of the textbooks are made available through the publishing companies. At one school where I taught, volunteers did the taping. We also used tapes that were recorded by a company called Recordings for the Blind.

2) A person with a learning disability has a low IQ.

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Again, not true. In order for a person to have a learning disability, they have to have an average or better IQ. There are many people who, although they intelligent, just cannot learn as well as their IQ suggests they should. I've told my students for a long time that having a learning disability is really a compliment because it means that they are very smart! But, since a negative by-product of a learning disability is often low self-esteem, they didn't always believe me.

Remember: the self-esteem issue is as important to deal with as the learning disability itself!

3) A person with a learning disability is just lazy.

There has to be a reason why the person with LD doesn't learn the way he should. Perhaps his brain doesn't process the information the right way. He may process information much slower than other people. Or he may not be able to process what he sees effectively. Some people can't process what they hear as well as what they see. Other people can't remember information unless it's repeated again and again, and some people have real trouble getting the information out of that filing system they have in their brain.

Typically people with learning disabilities work harder than others – but with lesser results. It's not about hard work – it's a learning disability.

4) A person with a learning disability can't do anything right.

Even though a child may have a learning disability in one or two areas, it doesn't mean they can't do anything right. My daughter struggled with a disability in math, but what a wonderful writer she is! And she has more knowledge about how to get around a computer than many people have. I envy that ability because I think I have a learning disability in that area!

I've known students who, even though they struggled with math or reading, were excellent around heavy equipment or automobile engines or carpentry or drafting. Many could do things with a computer that seemed impossible.

The important thing is that, if your child has a learning disability, or even if you suspect he might have one, learn everything you can so that you will know what to expect and what not to expect from him as well as from his teachers and his educational program. That way you will be able to understand and help him in the best way possible.

While none of us wants to consider the fact that our child might have a learning disability, it's the intelligent approach to take. When you recognize the truth about learning disabilities, you'll know how to maximize your child's abilities and minimize their dis-abilities.

For ways to be an advocate for your child, read "Advocating For Your Child With LD" at www.LDPerspectives.com.

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