

Learning Difficulties As We Know Them

Indicators, Evaluation, Support System

By Deviyani Pathak

Ms. Deviyani Pathak holds a M.Sc. in Specific Learning Disabilities (Dyslexia) from the University of Southampton, U.K. as well as a M.Sc. Degree in Psychotherapy and Counseling. She has extensive experience teaching children with learning disabilities. In her spare time she teaches children dance and theater for cultural programs and is involved in community service and outreach.

Learning Difficulty – Many of us have experienced enough encounters with this term, while some of us might only have encountered it in passing. In general terms a learning difficulty is difficulty experienced by an individual in the areas of reading, writing, spelling, and math which could be due to underlying difficulties in areas of cognition, attention or perception, with average or above average intelligence. Learning difficulties are of three types - Dyslexia is difficulties experienced in the area of reading, writing, spelling or comprehension. Dyscalculia is related to difficulties in comprehending numbers whereas Dyscalculia is difficulty experienced with writing. Symptoms accompanying each of these difficulties might be noticeable at the onset or be gradually brought to notice. However, it is important that we as parents, teachers and individuals notice these difficulties and seek advice from a specialist to get guidance for applying appropriate coping mechanisms.

Some of the important signs that we can notice that children are experiencing difficulties are:

- Reversal of letters (b-d or g-p), numbers (6-9 or 17-71). (Although we must keep in mind that some children tend to exhibit reversals up to a particular age, after which the difficulty gradually reduces)
- Incomplete or incorrect copying from the black board leading to incomplete class work leading to being distracted in class.
- Difficulties with spelling words which might include the following: Understanding the sounds of alphabets, getting confused with similar sounding words, spelling words on the basis of the phonic sound, and inappropriate syllabification of words.
- Difficulties with reading passages (especially those with unfamiliar and longer words) examples of which might include the following: Skipping words, substituting words beginning with the same alphabets (reading what as when) and being unable to track sentences and maybe skipping sentences in between, and leaving a sentence half-way and moving to the next sentence.
- Difficulty comprehending passages based on the skills of listening and reading.
- Difficulties with math such as with performing basic mathematical operations like addition subtraction, multiplication and division; remembering long steps in sequence; or not remembering formulas, writing numbers in correct order or one below the other or writing numbers in sequence.

- Difficulties with handwriting which could include an unusual pencil grip, different sizes of letters in the same sentence, writing outside lines or given boundaries and the tendency to avoid writing or getting tired easily.
- They might even experience difficulties with their fine and gross motor skills which might include difficulties with buttoning, pincer grip, zipping, catching a ball or big objects. They might also sometimes find it difficult while playing with regard to throwing a ball, aiming at things or games which require objects to be aligned. In certain situations they come across as clumsy. Even after repeated instructions they might tend to repeat the same behavioral difficulty. All these behaviors exhibited are not a deliberate attempt, but have underlying cognitive or perceptual difficulty.

It is important for the benefit of the child that we seek professional advice at the onset of a few of these symptoms. It is important to note that not all children who exhibit a few of these difficulties are experiencing a learning difficulty; there are other factors that need to be evaluated before we can assert our concern. We cannot gather all the criteria for evaluating a child just by reading about a few symptoms. Thus a professional who has expertise and knowledge in this area should analyze the situation. Early interventions seem to be more effective for children.

How can you be a support system for your child?

Accept, Appreciate and Motivate

Accepting that you or your child is experiencing a difficulty with learning is the basic and the most crucial step towards effective coping. The emotional aspect of the child and the family cannot be neglected. Parents also sometimes find it difficult to accept that their child is experiencing difficulty. In such a situation it's better to say, "*My child learns differently as compared to feeling that your child has a learning difficulty*". It is true that teaching children with a multi sensory approach and by teaching various study skills and mechanisms the child will be able to develop his/her own learning strategies.

Timely and honest appreciation plays a major role in inculcating the feeling of confidence within the child. A child need not be praised inappropriately or in an exaggerated manner, it needs to be enough for the child to continue the hard work or possibly work even harder in the future. Children generally tend to have lower confidence levels and are quiet apprehensive towards attempting any situation alien to them. Catering to emotional needs plays a crucial role in the progressive development of the child since the child is able to comprehend situations well, possesses superior skills in some areas but experiences difficulties in some areas of language or math. This affects the confidence level. Many-a-times they are also reluctant to take part in group activities or interact with their peers. We need to build a strong support system so that the child is able to benefit and be motivated to explore new avenues. Children do possess some special skill and might be excelling in some field or the other. It is our duty as parents; teachers and specialists identify these skills and channelize them appropriately and motivate them to develop these skills further.

If you have questions about this topic that you would like to explore further you can reach Deviyani Pathak at info@teachindiaproject.org