

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Learning Disorders: An Introduction

Learning Disorders are diagnosed when a student's achievement in particular areas of learning (such as spoken or written language, mathematics abilities, etc.), as measured by formal and standardized tests of academic achievement) are significantly less well developed than would be expected given that students' intelligence (as measured by a formal and standardized test of intelligence), and grade level. Formal subtypes of learning disorders include: Reading Disorder, Mathematics Disorder, and Disorder of Written Expression. As with most disorder families, a 'not otherwise specified' catch-all category is made available so that cases that don't quite fit the established categories can be described.

Learning disorders are true clinical disorders that are likely founded in slightly (or not so slightly) abnormal brain development, and are not just clinical labels given to excuse poor performance in otherwise normal students. According to the National Center for Learning Disabilities website, "Learning disabilities are neurological disorders that interfere with a person's ability to store, process, or produce information, and create a "gap" between one's ability and performance. Individuals with learning disabilities are generally of average or above average intelligence." Learning disorders sometimes co-occur with other cognitive difficulties (in speech and/or in coordination), but by definition are not due to overall intellectual deficits. IQ scores of learning disabled persons are always higher than one would expect given their deficit performance areas.

A good way to think about what learning disabilities are, is perhaps to regard them as specific non-optimally developed areas in otherwise reasonably 'developmentally normal' individuals. Factors that may contribute to the development of learning disorders include inherited genetic deficits, pre-birth or birth injuries (for example, a drinking or drug using mother), and various other early-life medical complications. The fact that some people experience learning disorders is not their fault. Despite this, it is not uncommon for learning disordered persons to regard themselves as inadequate.

That learning disordered persons may have difficulty making good grades during their school years is obvious. What is less obvious is the social and psychological effects that tend to follow in the wake of learning disabilities. Learning disabled students tend to drop out of school prior to graduation at higher than normal rates. Their self-esteem and sense of being able to achieve mastery over various subjects is negatively impacted.

Special assistance and learning programs are often available through schools (public and private) for students with learning disabilities. Often, these programs will also assist in the process of assessing for the presence of learning disabilities. Participation in such programs can prove very helpful to learning disabled students' academic and psychological well-being. It is thus a good idea to advocate having children tested for learning problems when it becomes apparent that grades in specific subjects are not where they might be.

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