# **Learning Disabilities & Differences: What Parents Need To Know**

**Source:** [www.healthychildren.org](http://www.healthychildren.org)

**By:** Jennifer Zubler

Children learn many skills in life—how to listen and speak, for example, or how to read, write, and do math. Some skills may be harder to learn than others. If your child has had appropriate learning experiences and instruction, but is not able to keep up with peers, it's important to find out why and how to help.

Children who learn and think differently can succeed in school, work, and relationships. Often, they can benefit from help that uses their strengths and targets any areas of need.

## **What is a learning disability (LD)?**

Learning disability is a term used to describe a range of learning and thinking differences that can affect the way the brain takes in, uses, stores, and sends out information. Some children have specific learning disabilities (also known as LDs), such as reading or math disabilities. Others may have conditions that affect learning like attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder ([ADHD](https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/adhd/Pages/default.aspx)) or [hearing loss](https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/ear-nose-throat/Pages/Could-My-Child-Have-A-Hearing-Problem.aspx). Many children with learning differences and difficulties can have more than one learning disability or condition that affects learning.

## **What causes learning difficulties?**

There are many reasons why a child may have difficulties learning. The causes aren't always known, but in many cases children have a parent or relative with the same or similar learning and thinking differences and difficulties. Other risk factors include low birth weight and prematurity, or an injury or illness during childhood (for example, head injury, lead poisoning, a childhood illness like meningitis).

**Regardless of the cause of learning difficulties, the first step is to recognize your child is struggling and to discuss your concerns with your child's teachers and doctor. Together, you can find out what is contributing to the difficulties and make sure your child gets any**[**help**](https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/teen/school/Pages/Poor-School-Performance-How-Parents-Can-Help.aspx)**needed.**

## **How do I know if my child has learning differences and difficulties?**

Learning and thinking differences aren't always obvious, but there are some signs that could mean your child needs help. Keep in mind that children develop and learn at different rates. Talk with your child's teacher and let your child's doctor know if your child shows any of the following signs:

## **Preschool children may have:**

* Delays in [language development](https://www.healthychildren.org/English/tips-tools/ask-the-pediatrician/Pages/one-year-old--Should-she-be-talking-by-now.aspx). By 2½ years of age, your preschool-age child should be able to talk in phrases or short sentences.
* Trouble with speech. By 3 years of age, your child should speak well enough so that adults can understand most of what they say.
* Trouble learning colors, shapes, letters, and numbers.
* Trouble rhyming words.
* Trouble with coordination. By 5 years of age, your child should be able to button clothing, use scissors, and hop. They should be able to copy a circle, square, or triangle.
* Short attention spans. Between 3 to 5 years of age, your child should be able to sit still and listen to a short story. As your child gets older, they should be able to pay attention for a longer time.
* Frustration or anger when trying to learn.

**School-aged children and teens may find it difficult to:**

* Follow directions.
* Get and stay organized at home and school.
* Understand verbal directions.
* Learn facts and remember information.
* Read, spell, or sound out words.
* Write clearly (may have poor handwriting).
* Do math calculations or word problems.
* Focus on and finish schoolwork.
* Explain information clearly with speech or in writing.

## **Is there a cure for learning disabilities?​**

There is not necessarily a "cure" for learning disabilities, but there are many ways to help children and families manage them in a way that helps children learn and thrive in life. Be wary of people and groups who claim to have simple answers or solutions. You may hear about eye exercises, body movements, special diets, vitamins, and nutritional supplements. There's no good evidence that these work. If in doubt, talk with your child's doctor. Also, you can contact trusted resources like the ones listed at the bottom of this page for more information.

## **Who can help?**

Talk with your child's doctor and teachers about any learning struggles you [notice](https://www.understood.org/take-note). Pediatricians can evaluate developmental delays and other [conditions that may be contributing](https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/teen/school/Pages/Poor-School-Performance-How-Parents-Can-Help.aspx) to learning difficulties. They can also refer you to specialists in neurodevelopmental disabilities, developmental and behavioral pediatrics, child neurology, or child psychology, for example. Teachers and other education specialists perform screening or evaluation tests to identify problems and determine if early interventions or school-based supports can help. Most school evaluation teams include psychologists and learning specialists.

## **4 ways parents can help children who learn and think differently**

In addition to working with your child's teachers and doctors, you can help support your child with learning disabilities and difficulties. For example:

* **Focus on strengths.** All children have things they do well and things that are difficult for them. Find your child's strengths and help them learn to use them. Your child might be good at math, music, or sports. She could be skilled at art, working with tools, or caring for animals. Be sure to praise your child often when she does well or succeeds at a task.
* **Develop social and emotional skills.**Learning differences combined with the challenges of growing up can make your child sad, angry, or withdrawn. Help your child by providing love and support while acknowledging that learning is hard because their brain learns in a different way. Try to find clubs, teams, and other activities that focus on friendship and fun. These activities should also build confidence. And remember, competition isn't just about winning.
* **Use resources & support groups** to help you learn more about parenting a child with learning difficulties. Learning and thinking differences are common. You and your child are not alone in this journey.
* **Plan for the future.** Many parents whose child learns and thinks differently worry about the future. Help your child plan for adulthood by encouraging them to consider their strengths and interests in education and career choices. Remind them that learning differently isn't tied to how smart they are. In fact, many people with learning difficulties are very bright and grow up to be highly successful at what they do. Special career and work programs can help build confidence by teaching decision-making and job skills. Many colleges have programs to support students who learn and think differently successfully earn a degree.

## **Remember**

Children who learn and think differently can thrive with the right support. The sooner you know what's going on with your child, the sooner you can get your child help. Talk with your child's teachers and doctor if you have any concerns about your child's learning.