

WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT LEARNING DISABILITIES?

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The focus of this article is to raise a sense of awareness about learning disabilities (LD) among parents, teachers, teacher educators, educational administrators, policymakers and all other stake holders involved in the education of individuals with learning disabilities. The number of children diagnosed with LD is increasing globally, and India is no exception. The Nalanda Institute Report has highlighted that in India during the last decade or so there has been an increasing awareness and identification of children with LD. A study conducted in south India reports on the incidence of dyscalculia which is said to be anywhere between 5.5 and 6% (Ramana, & Gowramma, 2002). According to Krishnakumar (1999), ten percent of children in India have dyslexia. According to Bhooma Krishnan (2007), 10-14% of the national child population of 416 million in India has learning disabilities. She cautions that this may be a rough estimate as many are undetected and unreported. Tandon (2007) reports that the prevalence of learning disabilities is the greatest among all disabilities in India with 10 to 12 per cent of the school-aged population having learning disabilities. Although some numbers have been cited, it may not be possible to have a clear idea about the incidence and prevalence of LD in India. Epidemiological studies of LD are fraught with difficulties ranging from the very definition of LD to the role of socio-cultural factors unique to a country like India.

Substantial research has been going on in the area of learning disability in India and this has increased the awareness of LD among the public. The growing awareness has prompted many parents to seek intervention for their children's learning problems. After intense persuasion and lobbying by parents and educationists, special provisions are in place for children with LD. Many state governments have granted individuals with learning disabilities the option of availing provisions like extra time 30 minutes for all written tests with spelling errors being overlooked, employing a writer for persons with writing problems, exemption of a second language and substituting with a work experience subject, and exemption of standard

ten math course and substituting it with a lower level math course. However, these provisions are not available to all persons with learning disabilities in India. Not all persons with learning disabilities get to be identified and helped because of the non-availability of standardized psychological and achievement tests in different languages.

Samveda Training and Research Center says "In a society where scholastic achievements overshadow other talents of a child, creating awareness and acceptance about learning disabilities is a task of prime importance".

What is learning disability?

One needs to be aware that not all persons who have learning problems have learning disabilities. The child with a learning disability is not a child who is mentally retarded; instead the child with a learning disability is one who has average or near-average or above-average intelligence and yet struggles to perform academically. The child with a learning disability is a smart child; however, there is a gap between how smart the child is and what he/she is able to achieve. There seems to be cognitive roadblocks set up by the brain and these roadblocks prevent the child from inputting, interpreting, organizing, reproducing and processing information. Some of these so-called roadblocks that seem to hinder learning are memory problems, attention problems, hyperactivity problems and auditory/visual perceptual problems. Consequently, a hallmark of learning disabilities is that individuals who are learning-disabled learn and work below their intellectual capabilities.

What are some of the characteristics associated with learning disabilities?

According to Mercer (1997), there are 500,000 combinations of characteristics associated with learning disabilities. Because of the heterogeneity of this disorder, no two individuals with LD are alike. A few of the characteristics that individuals with LD manifest are:

- Delay or difficulty in understanding or using spoken language, difficulty in reading, handwriting, spelling and written expression.

- Limited vocabulary.
- Difficulty with mathematical concepts including calculation, time and space.
- Difficulty in understanding simple instructions
- Problems with attention, memory and perception
- Difficulty producing certain speech sounds, pronouncing certain letters or letter combinations.
- Difficulty following and carrying out a sequence of instructions.
- Problems stating thoughts in an organized way - this is evident in their written work also.
- Confusing the order of letters in words or numbers in math problems (some persons with LD see 35 as 53 and 'was' as 'saw').
- Difficulty with directional words such as left, right, up, down, top, bottom, etc.
- Difficulty taking notes and listening to lecture at the same time.
- Difficulty with processing of information.
- Difficulty socializing with peers; problems understanding nonverbal communication like body language, etc.

What are the signs and symptoms of a learning disability?

Persons with learning disabilities are not lazy and they are not dumb. They are individuals who are endowed with intelligence but do not know how to use their intelligence. Consequently, both parents and teachers are sometimes amazed to find out that the persons that they thought of as bright and creative are struggling in school. Aren't there individuals who excel in math and are not able to spell their name? Aren't there individuals who can speak a mile a minute but cannot do the most basic math problems? Aren't there individuals who were able to recite the multiplication tables two hours ago and yet failed the test an hour later? Aren't there children and adults who have trouble naming letters and sounding out words despite the fact that they often have a large vocabulary and reason well? A pattern of uneven development is noticed among persons with LD. While they can do something very complex and complicated in one area, they cannot do the most basic stuff in another. It is because their mental faculties are developing at various rates. The intriguing and the painful part of learning disability

is the individual's inability to process information. The individual's high intellectual horsepower.

How to help individuals with learning disabilities

Research indicates that the brains of persons with learning disabilities are wired differently and hence they have different learning styles. Traditional teaching methods do not work with them. If they can't learn because of the way they are taught, they have to be taught in a way that matches their learning style. Teachers have to be willing to match their teaching style to the learning style of the student. There are visual, auditory, kinesthetic and tactile learners and teachers should cater to the stronger modality of the students. Individuals with learning disabilities should be presented with information in a sequential manner, and material should be explained in sequential steps. Advance organizers should be used before the beginning of each lesson by way of preparing the student ready for what is going to be taught. Students with short attention spans may like to have six assignments to complete rather than have one long assignment. Some students with learning disabilities have difficulty taking notes in an organized manner. For such students, teachers may prepare guided notes and distribute them. Drill and multiple practice are helpful. Density of instruction, repetition of content material to help. Some individuals with learning disabilities, those with processing difficulties, would like to have more time for the completion of tests and assignments. Whatever teaching strategies may be adopted in school, what is important is to assess and meet each child's needs and have the needs met. If one teaching approach does not work with individuals with learning disabilities; each person is so different from others that a variety of teaching strategies need to be used for all students to learn and succeed in the classroom.

CONCLUSION

Once parents and teachers notice that a child is having problems with certain developmental areas like speaking, reading, writing, it is best to seek help from professionals. Learning disability is a life-long condition. The effects of learning disabilities can be controlled with appropriate support, guidance, and intervention at home and school. School and home vigilance are needed to help persons with learning disabilities.