

Learning Disabilities: What Can Parents Do?



Sandi Lindgren, PhD, MSW

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How confusing and scary it can be for parents who suspect or find out that their child has (or might have) a learning disability. Sometimes parents blame themselves and worry that they did something wrong as a parent. Sometimes they blame the other parent or the school for failing to teach their child. And sometimes, the kids themselves are blamed for “not trying hard enough”. The first step in developing a plan.... which is to breathe. I mean, B.R.E.A.T.H.E. Parents want the best for their children, and children want to do their best to please their parents, and receive recognition for doing well. For some children, recognition is received as a form of love. An undiagnosed learning disability can create many more problems than one that is diagnosed. I have some recommendations listed below that are in steps - however, it is important to note that these steps are often happening at the same time, or in a different order - based on immediate needs and concerns.

1. The first step is to rule out anything physical. Go see the family physician and talk about your concerns, and request a full physical workup to rule out anything that might be causing the concern. This should include both vision and hearing tests, to rule out any of these issues.

2. The second step, if the child is of school age, is to talk to the school social worker about what the school is seeing, and discuss whether or not an evaluation for specific accommodations for your child, or special education might be supported. Some schools will start with what is called a 504 plan - a plan that is created by the school teachers, social worker, and parent to make some specific adjustments for the child at school. Maybe their child needs a little extra time to take a test or needs to be in a quieter room in order to complete homework. For some children, being given extra time or sitting in front, or having permission to leave the classroom early before the rest of the children can help. The beauty of a 504 plan is that it is tailored to your child specifically. A 504 plan is not considered special education, but it will provide specific individualized support for that student. Once written and agreed upon with the parent, the 504 plan helps to hold the school accountable for following through with those accommodations and giving them permission to give your child additional support. If that doesn't work, or sometimes depending on the issue - the school will want to do a special education evaluation to see if the student qualifies for special education services. This is scary for most parents, as well as for older students who don't want to be "labeled". However, for students that do qualify for special education, it is a bonus for that student to receive specific accommodations to support their learning style and receive extra support for areas that need specific attention. It is important to know that being in special education does not mean that a child is not smart. It just means that they may not learn in the same way that the majority of the other students learn. If the school has not moved forward with a special education evaluation, the parent has the right to request this evaluation of the school. The school (at least in Minnesota) has a specific number of school days to conduct the evaluation if the parent puts the request into writing. If the student qualifies for special education, the school will write up what is called an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP), that will be put into place if the parent is in agreement. The cool thing about an IEP is that the school not only creates a learning plan that is tailored to the learning needs of that student, it also becomes a protection for that student - and the school is required to support that student by following the plan. There are students that have an IEP for a few years of school, and then no longer need it. There are students who will go all the way through until graduation with an IEP. For older students with an IEP, the school provides what is called "transitional support" for older students, up to the age of 21 - where they focus on not only school learning, but also life skills learning, which will help them transition into adulthood.

3. The third step is to consider bringing that child to a mental health professional to have what is called a Diagnostic Assessment, or sometimes it is called a psychosocial assessment. This can be done by a licensed counselor, therapist, social worker or psychologist. This is a basic mental health evaluation to see if that child might be dealing with an undiagnosed mental health issue. Mental health issues can also exacerbate learning issues and a child's ability to function in the regular school environment. The therapist will meet with the parent/guardian as well as the child - often both together and separate, depending on the age of the child. This evaluation will result in the answer as to what might be going on with that child's mental health. There is much common mental health diagnosis that can get in the way of learning, and having an answer will help guide the next steps for the family.

4. The fourth step could be (depending on the results and recommendation of the diagnostic assessment and/or the special education evaluation) getting that child into some sort of individual therapy to help address the issues at hand. Sometimes family therapy is recommended as well so that the parents can receive support as well. There are many mental health issues that can be addressed by talking with a therapist and learning new skills.

5. For some children (depending on mental health issues), the parents may want to consult with a psychiatrist to see if medication management might be helpful. It is often scary to consider medication for a child. Not all children need medication. However, consulting with a psychiatrist will give you as a parent more information about what medication might or might not do for your child. Sometimes, medication can level the learning field, where your child has more of a chance to participate in the educational setting with less anxiety and stress. The choice is up to the parent. Starting a child on medication does not mean that medication is needed for life. Sometimes, medication allows the child to have the ability to learn new skills. This is a personal choice. Some primary doctors prescribe certain medications, however, a psychiatrist has more education and ability to understand different kinds of medication. If you do start your child on medication and don't like the side effects, it is extremely important to consult with the prescribing physician or psychiatrist prior to stopping the medication. There is no one pill that works the same for everyone - and some medications should not be stopped and started without consulting with a psychiatrist.

6. For other children, a more specific, in-depth assessment called a neuropsychological evaluation might be important to get a clear picture of the child's needs and strategies to support that child. This is done by a specialist who is trained in both psychology as well as neurology (the brain). The resulting report and meeting with the parent will give specific guidelines and suggestions based on the needs of that child's results.

It's important to note that parents do not have to do this alone. There are many organizations to support parents and children through this process. With any mental health diagnosis, a child can qualify for a children's mental health case manager - one who will support the child and the parents as they go through these evaluations and help them find appropriate services for that child. It is important to remember that learning disabilities, just like mental health diagnosis are not chosen. They just happen. There may be a specific cause for them, or not. However, knowing what you are dealing with will help you and your child be better able to cope. If a child has a specific learning disability, it is the responsibility of the school to provide accommodations for education, which can lessen the stress of school and homework. It's important for parents to stay in touch with the school and talk with their child about their experiences at school. At times, a change of school may be appropriate as well. This can be a stressful journey, however, it is a journey that many walk, and you do not have to walk it alone.

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John K (not verified) | Thu, 09/06/2018 - 20:05 | [Permalink](#)

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"Feedback: well written and balanced"

As a parent of young adults who fit the diagnosis of learning disabilities, this is well written and very balanced advice for any parent. They are older now and and this would have been very helpful at the beginning of our journey.

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Donna Biedron (not verified) | Thu, 09/06/2018 - 20:27 | [Permalink](#)

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“Nice, positive article with”

Nice, positive article with concise and helpful information for parents and others that work with children.

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Donna Lindgren (not verified) | Fri, 09/07/2018 - 02:03 | [Permalink](#)

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“Learning Disabilities: What Can Parents Do?”

Wonderful article. Well informed for parents to take into consideration as what to do and how to go about getting help for their children.

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“Excellent article! I”

Excellent article! I especially like the part about how important it is for everyone involved to remember that learning disabilities, just like mental health diagnosis are not chosen.

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Excellent article.

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Cheryl Bjerke (not verified) | Sat, 09/08/2018 - 11:38 | [Permalink](#)

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“Learning Disabilities”

Great article, great information. This article has been given to many school teachers and special education teachers. The parents who have read this article that have students who are involved in Special Education services at school. Keep it coming!

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