

Specific Learning Difficulties

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Factsheet for parents and teachers

What is a specific learning difficulty?

A child with a specific learning difficulty is as able as any other child, except in one or two areas of their learning. For instance, they may find it difficult to recognise letters, or to cope with numbers or reading.

There are many different types of specific learning disability, but the best known is probably dyslexia. In dyslexia, the child has difficulty with written symbols. Although these children are generally intelligent, they have difficulty with reading and spelling. It may be difficult for parents and teachers to realise that a child has this sort of problem, especially if their development has appeared quite normal in the early years. Often, the child will appear to understand, have good ideas, and join in storytelling and other activities as well as other children and better than some. Sometimes it can take years for adults to realise that a child has a specific difficulty.

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What effect does it have?

Specific difficulties can make lessons hard for a child to understand. They will have a hard time keeping up with classmates, and may come to see themselves as stupid, or no good. They find it hard to concentrate on lessons and, because they cannot follow them properly, they find lessons 'boring'. The child will often search for other ways to pass the time and to succeed. They may try to avoid doing schoolwork because they find it impossible to do it well.

Doing badly in school can undermine their self-confidence. This can make it harder for the child to get along with other children and to keep friends. They may become the clown of the class because it is better than being 'stupid'. Children with specific reading difficulties often become angry and frustrated, so behavioural problems are common. If they don't get suitable help, the problems may get worse. Older children may drop out, fail exams or get into serious trouble – both at school and outside.

What can help?

A child with learning difficulties should have their needs properly assessed by their school. If you think this may be necessary, you should talk to the teacher about your concerns. If problems continue, the child may need to be assessed by an educational psychologist. If the learning problem seems to be associated with hyperactivity, behavioural problems, or problems with coordination, extra help may be needed.

A detailed assessment of the child's difficulties should be made if they are struggling more than normal with school work, especially if there are difficulties with:

- ✓ reading, writing or arithmetic
- ✓ understanding and following instructions, remembering what they have just been told
- ✓ telling left from right, e.g. confusing '25' with '52', 'b' with 'd', or 'on' with 'no'
- ✓ coordination or clumsiness, e.g. in using a pencil, doing buttons, tying shoe-laces or in sports their idea of time, e.g. confusing 'yesterday', 'today' and 'tomorrow'.

If you think your child may have specific learning difficulties, remember, you can request an assessment of special educational needs. Speak to the child's school. Talking to your child's teacher about your concerns is a good place to start.

If you feel that your child's learning problem has resulted in emotional or behaviour problems, due to frustration or loss of self-confidence, you may need more specialised help. Your child's school will be able to advise you about this. Your general practitioner will also be able to help and, if necessary, refer you to your local child and adolescent mental health service. This service includes child psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers and specialist nurses who will be able to offer help and support.