

Helping Children with Learning Disabilities

Practical Parenting Tips for Home and School

When it comes to learning disabilities, look at the big picture

Recognizing a learning disorder

By understanding the [different types of learning disorders and their signs](#), you can pinpoint the specific challenges your child faces and find a treatment program that works.

All children need love, encouragement, and support, and for kids with learning disabilities, such positive reinforcement can help ensure that they emerge with a strong sense of self-worth, confidence, and the determination to keep going even when things are tough.

In searching for ways to help children with learning disabilities, remember that you are looking for ways to help them help themselves. Your job as a parent is not to “cure” the learning disability, but to give your child the social and emotional tools he or she needs to work through challenges. In the long run, facing and overcoming a challenge such as a learning disability can help your child grow stronger and more resilient.

Always remember that the way you behave and respond to challenges has a big impact on your child. A good attitude won't solve the problems associated with a learning disability, but it can give your child hope and confidence that things can improve and that he or she will eventually succeed.

Tips for dealing with your child's learning disability

- **Keep things in perspective. A learning disability isn't insurmountable.** Remind yourself that everyone faces obstacles. It's up to you as a parent to teach your child *how* to deal with those obstacles without becoming discouraged or overwhelmed. Don't let the tests, school bureaucracy, and endless paperwork distract you from what's really important—giving your child plenty of emotional and moral support.
- **Become your own expert.** Do your own research and keep abreast of new developments in learning disability programs, therapies, and educational techniques. You may be tempted to look to others—teachers, therapists, doctors—for solutions, especially at first. But you're the foremost expert on your child, so take charge when it comes to finding the tools he or she needs in order to learn.
- **Be an advocate for your child.** You may have to speak up time and time again to get special help for your child. Embrace your role as a proactive parent and work on your communication skills. It may be frustrating at times, but by remaining calm and reasonable, yet firm, you can make a huge difference for your child.
- **Remember that your influence outweighs all others.** Your child will follow your lead. If you approach learning challenges with optimism, hard work, and a sense of humor, your child is likely to embrace your perspective—or at least see the challenges as a speed bump, rather than a roadblock. Focus your energy on learning what works for your child and implementing it the best you can.

Focus on strengths, not just weaknesses

Your child is not defined by his or her learning disability. A learning disability represents one area of weakness, but there are many more areas of strengths. Focus on your child's gifts and talents. Your child's life—and schedule—shouldn't revolve around the learning disability. Nurture the activities where he or she excels, and make plenty of time for them.

Helping children with learning disabilities tip 1: Take charge of your child's education

In this age of endless budget cuts and inadequately funded schools, your role in your child's education is more important than ever. Don't sit back and let someone else be responsible for providing your child with the tools they need to learn. You can and should take an active role in your child's education.

If there is demonstrated educational need, the school is required by law to develop an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that delivers *some* educational benefit, but not necessarily one that maximizes student achievement. Parents who want the best for their kids may find this standard frustrating. Understanding special education laws and your school's guidelines for services will help you get the best support for your child at school. Your child may be eligible for many kinds of accommodations and support services, but the school might not provide services unless you ask for them.

Tips for communicating with your child's school:

Being a vocal advocate for your child can be challenging. You'll need superior communication and negotiation skills, and the confidence to defend your child's right to a proper education.

- **Clarify your goals.** Before meetings, write down what you want to accomplish. Decide what is most important, and what you are willing to negotiate.
- **Be a good listener.** Allow school officials to explain their opinions. If you don't understand what someone is saying, ask for clarification. "What I hear you saying is..." can help ensure that both parties understand.
- **Offer new solutions.** You have the advantage of not being a "part of the system," and may have new ideas. Do your research and find examples of what other schools have done.
- **Keep the focus.** The school system is dealing with a large number of children; you are only concerned with your child. Help the meeting stay focused on your child. Mention your child's name frequently, don't drift into generalizations, and resist the urge to fight larger battles.
- **Stay calm, collected and positive.** Go into the meeting assuming that everyone wants to help. If you say something you regret, simply apologize and try to get back on track.
- **Don't give up easily.** If you're not satisfied with the school's response, try again.

Recognize the limitations of the school system

Parents sometimes make the mistake of investing all of their time and energy into the school as the primary solution for their child's learning disability. It is better to recognize that the school situation for your child will probably never be perfect. Too many regulations and limited funding mean that the services and accommodations your child receives may not be exactly what you envision for them, and this will probably cause you frustration, anger and stress.

Try to recognize that the school will be only one part of the solution for your child and leave some of the stress behind. Your attitude (of support, encouragement and optimism) will have the most lasting impact on your child.

Helping children with learning disabilities tip 2: Identify how your child learns best

Everyone—learning disability or not—has their own unique learning style. Some people learn best by seeing or reading, others by listening, and still others by doing. You can help a child with a learning disability by identifying his or her primary learning style.

Is your child a visual learner, an auditory learner, or a kinesthetic learner? Once you've figured out how he or she learns best, you can take steps to make sure that type of learning is reinforced in the classroom and during home study. The following lists will help you determine what type of learner your child is.

Is your child a visual learner?

- If your child is a visual learner, he or she:
- Learns best by seeing or reading
- Does well when material is presented and tested visually, not verbally
- Benefits from written notes, directions, diagrams, charts, maps, and pictures
- May love to draw, read, and write; is probably a good speller

Is your child an auditory learner?

If your child is an auditory learner, he or she:

- Learns best by listening
- Does well in lecture-based learning environments and on oral reports and tests
- Benefits from classroom discussions, spoken directions, study groups
- May love music, languages, and being on stage

Is your child a kinesthetic learner?

If your child is a kinesthetic learner, he or she:

- Learns best by doing and moving
- Does well when he or she can move, touch, explore, and create in order to learn

- Benefits from hands-on activities, lab classes, props, skits, and field trips
- May love sports, drama, dance, martial arts, and arts and crafts

<p>Tips for visual learners:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use books, videos, computers, visual aids, and flashcards. • Make detailed, color-coded or highlighted notes. • Make outlines, diagrams, and lists. • Use drawings and illustrations (preferably in color). • Take detailed notes in class. 	<p>Tips for auditory learners:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read notes or study materials out loud. • Use word associations and verbal repetition to memorize. • Study with other students. Talk things through. • Listen to books on tape or other audio recordings. • Use a tape recorder to listen to lectures again later. 	<p>Tips for kinesthetic learners:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get hands on. Do experiments and take field trips. • Use activity-based study tools, like role-playing or model building. • Study in small groups and take frequent breaks. • Use memory games and flash cards. • Study with music on in the background.
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Helping children with learning disabilities tip 3: Think life success, rather than school success

Success means different things to different people, but your hopes and dreams for your child probably extend beyond good report cards. Maybe you hope that your child’s future includes a fulfilling job and satisfying relationships, for example, or a happy family and a sense of contentment.

The point is that success in *life*—rather than just school success—depends, not on academics, but on things like a healthy sense of self, the willingness to ask for and accept help, the determination to keep trying in spite of challenges, the ability to form healthy relationships with others, and other qualities that aren’t as easy to quantify as grades and SAT scores.

A 20-year study that followed children with learning disabilities into adulthood identified the following six “life success” attributes. By focusing on these broad skills, you can help give your child a huge leg up in life.

Learning disabilities and success #1: Self-awareness and self-confidence

For children with learning disabilities, self-awareness (knowledge about strengths, weaknesses, and special talents) and self-confidence are very important. Struggles in the classroom can cause children to doubt their abilities and question their strengths.

- Ask your child to list his or her strengths and weaknesses and talk about your own strengths and weaknesses with your child.
- Encourage your child to talk to adults with learning disabilities and to ask about their challenges, as well as their strengths.
- Work with your child on activities that are within his or her capabilities. This will help build feelings of success and competency.
- Help your child develop his or her strengths and passions. Feeling passionate and skilled in one area may inspire hard work in other areas too.

Learning disabilities and success #2: Being proactive

A proactive person is able to make decisions and take action to resolve problems or achieve goals. For people with learning disabilities, being proactive also involves self-advocacy (for example, asking for a seat at the front of the classroom) and the willingness to take responsibility for choices.

- Talk with your learning disabled child about problem solving and share how you approach problems in your life.
- Ask your child how he or she approaches problems. How do problems make him or her feel? How does he or she decide what action to take?
- If your child is hesitant to make choices and take action, try to provide some “safe” situations to test the water, like choosing what to make for dinner or thinking of a solution for a scheduling conflict.
- Discuss different problems, possible decisions, and outcomes with your child. Have your child pretend to be part of the situation and make his or her own decisions.

Learning disabilities and success #3: Perseverance

Perseverance is the drive to keep going despite challenges and failures, and the flexibility to change plans if things aren't working. Children (or adults) with learning disabilities may need to work harder and longer because of their disability.

- Talk with your learning disabled child about times when he or she persevered—why did he or she keep going? Share stories about when you have faced challenges and not given up.
- Discuss what it means to keep going even when things aren't easy. Talk about the rewards of hard work, as well as the opportunities missed by giving up.
- When your child has worked hard, but failed to achieve his or her goal, discuss different possibilities for moving forward.

Learning disabilities and success #4: The ability to set goals

The ability to set realistic and attainable goals is a vital skill for life success. It also involves the flexibility to adapt and adjust goals according to changing circumstances, limitations, or challenges.

- Help your child identify a few short- or long-term goals and write down steps and a timeline to achieve the goals. Check in periodically to talk about progress and make adjustments as needed.
- Talk about your own short- and long-term goals with your child, as well as what you do when you encounter obstacles.
- Celebrate with your child when he or she achieves a goal. If certain goals are proving too hard to achieve, talk about why and how plans or goals might be adjusted to make them possible.

Learning disabilities and success #5: Knowing how to ask for help

Strong support systems are key for people with learning disabilities. Successful people are able to ask for help when they need it and reach out to others for support.

- Help your child nurture and develop good relationships. Model what it means to be a good friend and relative so your child knows what it means to help and support others.
- Demonstrate to your child how to ask for help in family situations.
- Share examples of people needing help, how they got it, and why it was good to ask for help. Present your child with role-play scenarios that might require help.

Learning disabilities and success #6: The ability to handle stress

If children with learning disabilities learn how to [regulate stress and calm themselves](#), they will be much better equipped to overcome challenges.

- Use words to identify feelings and help your child learn to recognize specific feelings.
- Ask your child what words they would use to describe stress. Does your child recognize when he or she is feeling stressed?
- Encourage your child to identify and participate in activities that help reduce stress like sports, games, music, or writing in a journal.
- Ask your child to describe activities and situations that make them feel stressed. Break down the scenarios and talk about how overwhelming feelings of stress and frustration might be avoided.

Recognizing stress in your child

It's important to be aware of the different ways in which stress can manifest. Your child may behave very differently than you do when he or she is under stress. Some signs of stress are more obvious: agitation, trouble sleeping, and worries that won't shut off. But some people—children included—shut down, space out, and withdraw when stressed. It's easy to overlook these signs, so be on the lookout for any behavior that's out of the ordinary.

Helping children with learning disabilities tip 4: Emphasize healthy lifestyle habits

It may seem like common sense that learning involves the body as well as the brain, but your child's eating, sleep, and exercise habits may be even more important than you think. If children with learning disabilities are eating right and getting enough sleep and exercise, they will be better able to focus, concentrate, and work hard.

- **Exercise** – Exercise isn't just good for the body, [it's good for the mind](#). Regular physical activity makes a huge difference in mood, energy, and mental clarity. Encourage your learning disabled child to get outside, move, and play. Rather than tiring out your child and taking away from schoolwork, regular exercise will actually help him or her stay alert and attentive throughout the day. Exercise is also a great antidote to stress and frustration.
- **Diet** – [A healthy, nutrient rich diet](#) will aid your child's growth and development. A diet full of whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and lean protein will help boost mental focus. Be sure your child starts the day with a good breakfast and doesn't go more than 4 hours between meals or snacks. This will help keep his or her energy levels stable.
- **Sleep** – Learning disability or not, your child is going to have trouble learning if he or she is not well rested. Kids need more [sleep](#) than adults do. On average, preschoolers need from 11-13 hours per night, middle school children need about 10-11 hours, and teens and preteens need from 8½-10 hours. You can help make sure your child is getting the sleep he or she needs by enforcing a set bedtime. The type of light emitted by electronic screens (computers, televisions, iPods and iPads, portable video players, etc.) is activating to the brain. So you can also help by powering off all electronics at least an hour or two before lights out.

Encouraging healthy emotional habits

In addition to healthy physical habits, you can also encourage children to have healthy emotional habits. Like you, they may be frustrated by the challenges presented by their learning disability. Try to give them outlets for expressing their anger, frustration, or feelings of discouragement. Listen when they want to talk and create an environment open to expression. Doing so will help them connect with their feelings and, eventually, learn how to calm themselves and regulate their emotions.

Helping children with learning disabilities tip 5: Take care of yourself, too

Sometimes the hardest part of parenting is remembering to take care of you. It's easy to get caught up in what your child needs, while forgetting your own needs. But if you don't look after yourself, you run the risk of burning out.

It's important to tend to your physical and emotional needs so that you're in a healthy space for your child. You won't be able to help your child if you're stressed out, exhausted, and emotionally depleted. When you're calm and focused, on the other hand, you're better able to connect with your child and help him or her be calm and focused too.

Your spouse, friends, and family members can be helpful teammates if you can find a way to include them and learn to ask for help when you need it.

Tips for taking care of yourself

- Learn how to [manage stress](#) in your own life. Make daily time for yourself to relax and decompress.
- Keep the lines of communication open with your spouse, family, and friends. Ask for help when you need it.
- Take care of yourself by eating well, exercising, and getting enough rest.
- Join a learning disorder support group. The encouragement and advice you'll get from other parents can be invaluable.
- Enlist teachers, therapists, and tutors whenever possible to share some of responsibility for day-to-day academic responsibilities.

Communicate with family and friends about your child's learning disability

Some parents keep their child's learning disability a secret, which can, even with the best intentions, look like shame or guilt. Without knowing, extended family and friends may not understand the disability or think that your child's behavior is stemming from laziness or hyperactivity. Once they are aware of what's going on, they can support your child's progress.

Within the family, siblings may feel that their brother or sister with a learning disability is getting more attention, less discipline and preferential treatment. Even if your other children understand that the learning disability creates special challenges, they can easily feel jealous or neglected. Parents can help curb these feelings by reassuring all of their children that they are loved, providing homework help, and by including family members in any special routines for the child with a learning disability.