



AUBREY  
PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES

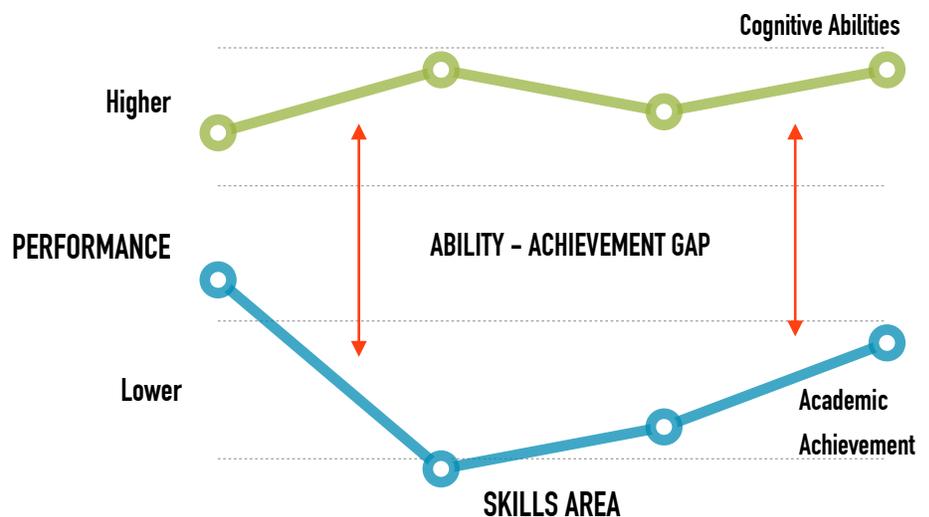


# UNDERSTANDING LEARNING DISABILITIES

BY DR. KATE AUBREY, CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST

## WHAT IS A LEARNING DISABILITY?

Children with a Learning Disability often have average cognitive abilities, but have difficulties in learning an academic skill, such as reading, math or writing. Therefore, there is a discrepancy between learning potential (IQ) and academic performance (reading, writing, or math). This discrepancy is accounted for by a processing deficit, such as difficulties with working memory, phonological processing, or visual-motor integration.



Learning disabilities can only be diagnosed by a registered psychologist, who will assess your child's learning potential and academic achievement.



## TYPES OF LEARNING DISABILITIES

**Learning disability in reading (dyslexia).** There are two types of learning disabilities in reading. Basic reading problems occur when there is difficulty understanding the relationship between sounds, letters and words (phonological awareness). Reading comprehension problems occur when there is an inability to grasp the meaning of words, phrases, and paragraphs.

**Learning disabilities in math (dyscalculia).** A child with a math-based learning disorder may struggle with memorization and organization of numbers, operation signs, and number “facts” (like  $5+5=10$  or  $5 \times 5=25$ ). Children with math learning disorders might also have trouble with counting principles (such as counting by twos or counting by fives) or have difficulty telling time. Challenges with working memory often account for learning disabilities in math.

**Learning disabilities in writing (dysgraphia).** Learning disabilities in writing can involve the physical act of writing or the mental activity of comprehending and synthesizing information. Basic writing disorder refers to physical difficulty forming words and letters. Expressive writing disability indicates a struggle to organize thoughts on paper.

## SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF LEARNING DISABILITIES

---

### Preschool

---

- Problems pronouncing words & rhyming
- Trouble learning the alphabet, numbers, colors, shapes, days of the week
- Difficulty following directions / routines
- Difficulty controlling crayons, pencils, and scissors, or coloring within the lines
- Trouble with buttons, zippers, snaps, learning to tie shoes

---

### Ages 5-9

---

- Trouble learning the connection between letters and sounds
- Unable to blend sounds to make words
- Confuses basic words when reading
- Consistently misspells words and makes frequent reading errors
- Trouble learning basic math concepts
- Difficulty telling time and remembering sequences

---

### Ages 10-13

---

- Difficulty with reading comprehension or math skills
- Trouble with open-ended test questions and word problems
- Dislikes reading and writing
- Spells the same word differently in a single document
- Poor organizational skills (bedroom, homework, desk is messy and disorganized)
- Trouble following classroom discussions and expressing thoughts aloud
- Poor handwriting

## SUPPORTS, ACCOMMODATIONS, & MODIFICATIONS

For many students with disabilities the key to success in the classroom lies in having appropriate accommodations and modifications made to the instruction and other classroom activities.

- **Modification:** *A modification is when there is a change in what is being taught to or expected from the student.* Making an assignment easier so the student is not doing the same level of work as other students is an example of a modification.
- **Accommodation/Adaptation:** *is a change that helps a student overcome or work around the disability.* Allowing a student who has trouble writing to give his answers orally is an example of an accommodation. This student is still expected to know the same material and answer the same questions as fully as the other students, but he doesn't have to write his answers to show that he knows the information. Accommodations can be **instructional** (e.g., extra time for tests, use of visuals, photocopies of notes); **environmental** (e.g., preferential seating, access to resource room); or for **assessment** (e.g., additional time for tests, use of a calculator). Usually accommodations are tried before curriculum modifications are made.

## INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PLAN (IEP)

An IEP is a documented plan developed for a student with special needs that summarizes and records the individualization of a student's education program. All students who meet criteria for a learning disability will require an IEP.

- An IEP provides accountability for:
  - Individualized goals
  - The means to achieve these goals
  - Additional services and how they will be delivered

An IEP assists teachers in monitoring student growth and progress. It provides an ongoing record to assist with continuity in programming and transition planning.

## SHOULD MY CHILD REPEAT A GRADE?

In most cases learning the same material a second time (even with supports) doesn't help all that much. The learning disability will still be there. Research suggests that repeating a grade does not really benefit students, and has a negative impact on self-esteem. It's better to provide effective accommodations OR modifications that allow students to remain with their peers.

SOURCES: *Learning Disabilities A to Z*, by C. Smith & L. Strick; Learning Disabilities Association of Canada; Learning Disabilities Association of BC.