



Tilley Psychological Services

201 10425 Princess Elizabeth Avenue • Edmonton, AB • T5G 0Y5

PHONE: 780-702-8905 • FAX: 1-888-350-3551

E-MAIL: linda@tilleypsych.com

Learning Disabilities

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General Information

A learning disability (LD) is essentially a processing disorder that can impact a number of different areas, including oral language, reading, spelling, math, writing, social perceptions, and organization. It can impact any one or several of the processes involved in learning, including perception, understanding, remembering, or applying what has been learned. Some people claim that there are 100's of types of LD.

An LD is neurological in origin, and can be genetic or arise from brain injury. Therefore, it is not the result of poor teacher or parenting, lack of educational opportunities, visual or auditory impairments, or poor motivation. It is also not the result of temporary conditions, such as a mood disorder or sleep deficit, and is not the same as low intellectual ability.

Learning disabilities can often occur in the presence of other conditions, such as ADHD, mood disorders, other medical conditions, or behavioural and emotional difficulties. However, attention problems, behavioural difficulties, and emotional problems can all result when a person has an LD and struggles to learn what seems to come easily to others.

Learning disabilities last throughout a person's life, although targeted educational strategies can help. They can be expressed differently throughout a person's life, depending on current life circumstances, whether there are other co-existing conditions, what kinds of support are available in the environment, and what

supports are available for learning. Generally, a person with an LD will not achieve at the level that is expected. If you have a child who is not achieving at his or her level, you may want to consider the possibility that he/she has an LD.

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Some Comments

Intelligence and LD: The Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC) definition points out that "learning disabilities are distinct from global intellectual deficiency," but also that learning disabilities affect people who are at least of average intellectual ability. This seems to me to contradict the statement that an LD is not the same as an intellectual deficit. I believe that people who have a lower than average intellectual ability can have a learning disability, but it is much harder to measure. As well, when intellectual ability is higher, it may be easier for a person to use other strategies to deal with their areas of weakness.

Alberta Education Criteria: *(Please note that this information may not be up to date ...)* Alberta Education generally uses the same definition as LDAC, but in order to provide support for a learning disability, a child has to be at least of average intellectual ability (37th percentile) with one or more areas of achievement being below average (10th percentile or less). This excludes children of low average intelligence who may have deficits in processing, as well as children who are intellectually gifted and because of overall intellectual ability, a high level of support within the school and family, or high motivation and persistence, are able to achieve higher than the 10th percentile. Such children will benefit from individualized tutoring outside the school system, although some schools are able to provide at least some individualized instruction.

Patterns of Learning: Parents and teachers of children with an LD are often quite frustrated because children with an LD may seem to learn something, but then the next day, or even a few minutes later, they have forgotten it. Children with a reading disability may read a word correctly in one sentence, but then be unable to read it in the next. Some children can decode difficult words, but make mistakes on simple, high frequency words (like "the"). These types of challenges are common in children with a learning disability, and it is important that the adults around them do not accuse the child of laziness, defiance, or lack of effort.

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Assessment

As with other conditions, assessment of an LD can be straightforward in some cases: if you have a child who is of average ability, seems reasonably motivated, does not have significant attention problems (apart from the area of disability), and does not have any emotional or medical conditions to complicate matters, the assessment of an LD can be relatively easy. However, if there are any other complicating factors, or if you have a child who is above or below average intellectual ability, measurement can be difficult. The assessment process, therefore, involves looking for a characteristic pattern of performance (weak achievement when compared to intellectual ability), a typical pattern of errors, and ruling out other factors.

The traditional approach to diagnosing an LD was to look for a big enough difference between intellectual ability and achievement (1 standard deviation for those of you who are statistically gifted). This is not adequate, mainly because people who are motivated will often work very hard to do their best, and will be able to struggle through and achieve at an average level. If the test scores do not take into account the pattern of errors and the time taken to complete the tasks, the scores may actually overestimate the person's ability to do the task in an everyday situation. On the other hand, this is probably a more reasonable approach to diagnosing LD in a person who is intellectually gifted.

This "discrepancy model" is still used quite frequently, but an assessor who understands learning disabilities will also look at the pattern of errors and the time taken to complete tasks, along with searching for evidence of processing deficits. This may require the use of additional testing, including tests for learning, memory, visual-motor integration, visual perception, attention, and emotional functioning.

The third aspect of assessing for an LD involves ruling out other causes. A thorough psychoeducational assessment should do this.

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