

Understanding and Identifying Learning Disabilities and ADHD: *A Guide for Parents and Educators*

What is a learning disability, and how is it diagnosed?

A learning disability is a developmental disorder that begins by school-age, although it may not be recognized until later. It involves ongoing problems learning key academic skills, including reading, writing and math. A learning disorder is not simply the result of lack of instruction or poor instruction. Key skills that may be impacted include reading of single words, reading comprehension, writing, spelling, math calculation and math problem solving, and difficulties with these skills may cause problems learning in other academic subjects.

A learning disorder diagnosis is not based on a single source of information. It is based on a combination of the child's medical and family history, observation, history of the learning difficulty, school reports, and educational and psychological assessments. Psycho-educational testing is able to establish the presence of a learning disorder and determine a cause for the child's difficulties in school.

What is ADHD, and how is it diagnosed?

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a neurological disorder characterized by an ongoing pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that interferes with functioning or development. While inattention and hyperactivity/impulsivity are the key behaviors of ADHD, some people with ADHD only have problems with one of the behaviors.

Symptoms of inattention include a tendency to overlook details, difficulty sustaining attention during play or tasks, not seeming to listen when directly spoken to, not following through on instructions and/or failing to complete tasks, difficulty organizing tasks or activities, avoiding or disliking things that are perceived as difficult or require sustained effort, losing things, being easily distracted by unrelated stimuli (i.e.: thoughts, sights or sounds), and being forgetful in daily activities.

Symptoms of hyperactivity-impulsivity include frequent fidgety or restless behaviors, leaving one's seat in situations where staying seated is expected, running or climbing in situations where it is inappropriate (teens or adults often feel restless), being unable to engage in hobbies quietly, being in constant motion or "on the go," non-stop talking, blurting out answers or interrupting others, and having difficulty waiting for one's turn.

Diagnosis of ADHD requires a comprehensive evaluation to establish that the individual's symptoms of ADHD are not better accounted for by another medical or psychiatric condition. For a person to receive a diagnosis of ADHD, the symptoms of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity must be chronic or long-lasting, impair the person's functioning, and cause the person to fall behind normal development for his or her age. It is important to consider that attention disorders share many common symptoms with other underlying disorders, and that it is not uncommon for individuals with ADHD to also have co-occurring conditions that may impact their learning, behavior and/or social-emotional functioning. Thus, comprehensive testing allows for accurate diagnosis and treatment of attention problems and related difficulties.

What are common academic problems for children with an underlying learning disability or ADHD?

- A child with an underlying learning disability in reading may exhibit poor decoding, reading comprehension and/or reading fluency skills. They may also have difficulty identifying relevant or important material in text, and they may demonstrate weak vocabulary knowledge.
- A child with an underlying learning disability in written expression may demonstrate poor spelling, grammar and mechanics usage, and/or lack of clarity and organization in their writing. They may also experience difficulties with letter formation, appropriate use of spacing, and handwriting.
- A child with an underlying learning disability in math may exhibit weaknesses in number sense, accurate or fluent calculation, and math reasoning. These weaknesses can make it difficult for the child to comprehend math symbols, memorize and organize numbers, tell time, and count.
- A child with ADHD may exhibit difficulties remembering information, transitioning from one task to another, initiating and completing tasks independently and within the allotted time, organizing materials and information, meeting deadlines, and planning appropriately for long-term assignments. It is also common for children with an underlying attention deficit to demonstrate inconsistencies in their learning and day-to-day school performance.

When should a parent consider a psycho-educational evaluation for their child?

Psycho-educational testing can be extremely helpful in identifying barriers to learning success. An evaluation should be considered when a child continues to struggle in one or more academic areas even after additional supports have been put in place to address their learning needs.

What are the benefits of testing?

Psycho-educational testing provides a clear understanding of a child's cognitive and academic functioning and considers other factors that might be impacting their learning, which allows for accurate diagnosis and treatment planning. Psycho-educational testing can:

- Provide information regarding a child's intellectual strengths and weaknesses
- Determine the presence of an underlying learning disorder
- Assess for ADHD or other executive functioning deficits
- Identify additional factors that may be impacting a child's learning and day-to-day functioning, such as social-emotional or behavioral issues
- Assess the need for special testing accommodations and/or program modifications as well as college disability resources

What is the process of psycho-educational testing?

Psycho-educational testing involves a battery of individually administered tests that measure a person's level of intelligence, academic achievement and behavioral and emotional functioning relative to normative standards. It also involves data collection from parents and teachers as well as review of academic records and the child's developmental, medical and social history. Following testing, parents are provided with a comprehensive written report detailing test findings with recommendations for addressing identified disabilities or areas of weakness. Guidance is also provided to parents to help them through the process of ensuring that their child's individual needs are addressed both in and out of school.