

# Talking with Your Elementary School Child about Learning Difficulties

Talking with your child about a sensitive topic like a learning disability (LD) is not easy. But it may be one of the most important things you can do to foster his learning and emotional development. When kids experience learning problems without understanding what's wrong, they're apt to imagine the worst.

## Listen for Early Signs of Problems

If you notice a change in attitude when your child talks about school, don't ignore the signs. Since you know him better than anyone else, be sensitive to the clues he's giving you. Frustration may sound like, "I hate school"..."Nobody likes me"..."I can't draw"..."Other kids make fun of how I talk." An older child might say, "School is so stupid; why do we even have to go?" or "See, Mom, I'm retarded...the teacher moved me to the dummy group in math."

"Some children, especially those with receptive and expressive language problems, may not understand the nature of their problems or don't know how to ask questions or engage in a dialogue."

— Dr. Bob Brooks

Many kids aren't able to express their feelings with words, but they let you know that things aren't going well in other ways. They tear up their schoolwork, refuse to talk about their day, or overreact with outbursts of temper. They tell you that they don't have any homework or forget to turn it in the next day. They don't want to go to school and complain of illness so that they can stay home. They say that they have no friends.

How should you respond to such behaviors? Ask yourself if your child has been acting this way for several weeks. Is there another explanation, such as a new baby in the house, an illness in the family, a change to a new school? What does his teacher say about his behavior or performance in school?

## Gather Some Facts

Getting a clear and complete understanding of the nature of your child's learning struggles is a first step. Talk with his teachers to find out the ways that his learning problems affect his educational progress in reading, writing, and math. You may also want to ask the teacher about his social and emotional development, since learning struggles often have an impact beyond academics.

## Sort through Your Feelings

When your child struggles at school, it's completely normal to feel worried, frustrated, and even disappointed. However, kids quickly pick up on a parent's negative feelings about their school performance. So it's important to find an

appropriate outlet for your feelings— with sympathetic family members, friends, or a professional therapist — to help you move toward acceptance of your child's learning problems. It might also be helpful to join a support group of parents of children with LD, either in your community or online. With adult support, your interactions with your child are likely to be more positive and optimistic.

### **Choose Your Words**

Figuring out what terms to use when you describe your child's learning problems to him can be tricky. General statements such as "your brain is unique and wired differently" may help your child understand that each human brain is unique. Choose the phrase carefully and decide which words are most comfortable for you. Encourage other adults in your child's life to use the same description you have chosen so there's consistency.

For some kids, it may be important to balance the "differences" statement with a more optimistic phrase like "differences in how your brain works may actually make you more skilled in certain areas than other kids." Tell him about family members, friends, or celebrities with learning disabilities who are successful and/or famous.

Educators, clinicians, and researchers each have their own vocabulary to describe learning problems. In the public school setting, for example, special education law requires that kids be identified with a particular label in order to qualify for special education services. The eligibility category of "specific learning disability" (SLD) is a broad label used to describe a group of disorders that may affect reading, writing, and/or math skills.

### **Use the Correct Terms**

If your child receives academic support from a resource teacher or in a special education classroom, it's important to use the proper term to describe the type of class he attends. For many kids, the terms "special education" or "special ed" are negative and upsetting labels, so be prepared for some resistance when he hears this term. But use the correct term when you talk with him because he's going to hear it sooner or later from teachers or peers. It may help to take the stigma away from the term "special education" if you use it interchangeably with a term like "resource help" or "reading help."

### **Make the Problem Concrete**

Simply telling your child that he has a learning disability in reading doesn't really help him understand the problem, nor offer any clues about how to manage it. On the other hand, if you tell your child that he has "trouble remembering the details of a story" or that he "needs to work on increasing reading speed," the problem is clear, specific, and suggests a goal for improvement. It also lets your child know that his learning struggles are limited to one aspect of reading, and that he can be successful in other areas of school which are less dependent on reading, such as science, math, art, or physical education. Show him examples of his

work that illustrate both strengths and weaknesses. Ask him if he can think of ways to make specific, challenging subjects easier and to learn the skills that are hard for him.

### **Listen Carefully to Your Child's Response**

“Other children may be embarrassed to discuss their problems, feeling that the spotlight is always cast on the things that are problematic for them.”

— Dr. Bob Brooks

Each child is unique; your child's reaction to a conversation about his learning problems may be unpredictable. Your child may be upset or angry about being "different." It's important to recognize his right to these feelings. When he seems able to listen, offer him reassurance that, through his own efforts and some adult help, he can learn. Back off a little if he's looking overwhelmed. He may need time to process the information about his learning issues and then return with some questions. Or, he may be inquisitive from the start and ask more questions than you can answer. Listen to his questions and give him honest answers. If you don't know the answer, assure him you will find out.

### **Follow Up Regularly**

After you've had your first talk with your child about his learning struggles, you will likely want to have several follow-up conversations. It's good to begin these talks by asking your child to describe in his own words how he currently understands or experiences his learning difficulties — and his progress. You may need to repeat your explanation of his learning difficulties several times before he is really able to grasp what it means. Once he has internalized some of the language and ideas, he may feel more comfortable talking about these issues with peers. In so doing, he is laying the foundation for self-advocacy at school.

### **Take Age and Maturity into Account**

Below is some general information about kids' needs for information about LD at various ages. You are the best judge of what your child is ready to hear, and his preferred ways of getting the information.

#### **Grades K-3**

Even young children worry about their performance in school. In the primary grades (K through 3), most kids begin to identify what they do well and what they have trouble with. Whether it's school work or athletic ability, kids begin the process of self-assessment and peer comparison. When you address your child's learning struggles, assure him that you and his teachers are working together to help him do well in school, that he doesn't have to do it all alone! If you feel it's appropriate, have him participate in informal meetings about learning challenges and goals with you and the teacher. If he's directly involved in the solution, it's more likely he'll be committed to improving.

## Grades 4 and 5

By the upper elementary grades (4 and 5), kids should have a good sense of their academic strengths and weaknesses. If your child identifies himself as a "poor" or "slow" student, help him understand the difference between a specific learning difficulty and a general lack of intelligence or ability. By legal definition, kids with LD have average to above average intelligence, so they're smart enough to learn. Let him know that, for some academic subjects, he just needs some very specific strategies to help him learn. Be honest about his difficulties, but provide factual information about his intelligence and the things he does well. Help him understand that his learning problems are just one part of who he is. ("Yes, you have trouble reading; but you're an amazing soccer player, a really great older brother, and a champion at Pictionary®. Reading problems are just one part of you.") This will help him to stay motivated and develop resilience for the long haul.

Fourth- and fifth-graders are experts at the "yeah, but" statements that can undermine success: "Yeah, but I got an 'F' on this spelling test, so I'm never gonna go to fifth grade." If you hear something like that, refocus him on the smaller picture — "Seems like you had a really hard time with that spelling test. Let's see how we can make next week's test better." Talk about what he could do differently and identify ways you can help him. And remember, it's essential to follow through on any promises of assistance.

## Keep Up the Good Work

When you can talk to your child about his specific learning difficulties in a knowledgeable and caring manner, there's a greater likelihood that he'll maintain his self-esteem, develop effective coping strategies, and learn to appreciate the diversity of his talents, both in and out of school. Ultimately, self-awareness, self-advocacy, self-respect, and hard work will be the keys to his success.

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About the Contributors

**Brian Inglesby**, is a school psychologist who enjoys the challenges of working with students who possess a broad spectrum of learning issues. Of special interest to Brian is the opportunity to provide teachers, parents, and students with the ability to better understand and manage a student's unique learning profile.

## **Other Resources**

### **Books**

All Kinds of Minds

[www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0838820905/](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0838820905/)

By Mel Levine

Keeping a Head in School

[www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0838820697/](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0838820697/)

By Mel Levine

The Don't-Give-Up Kid and Learning Differences

[www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/1884281109/](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/1884281109/)

By Jeanne M. A. Gehret

### **Websites**

KidsHealth

Learning Disabilities — Kids Health for Kids

[kidshealth.org/kid/health\\_problems/learning\\_problem/learning\\_disabilities.html](http://kidshealth.org/kid/health_problems/learning_problem/learning_disabilities.html)

SparkTop™ for Kids

[www.sparktop.org/intro.html](http://www.sparktop.org/intro.html)