

Learning Disabilities and Family Dynamics

by Betty Osman, Ph.D.



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Expert Answers

Learning Disabilities and Family Dynamics

How Learning Disabilities Affect Family Dynamics

The focus of identification and management of learning disabilities (LD) has been and continues to be primarily academic — how children's strengths and weaknesses affect achievement in school. Yet parents often report that LD affects life at home, as well. In this article, Betty Osman, Ph.D., describes how learning disabilities impact family dynamics.

From the moment parents become aware of their child's learning disability (LD), another dimension is added to the family system. While a young person's problems may seem most apparent at school, they quickly become "a family affair" in every sense of the word.

Life in the family of a child with LD is complex and challenging, involving practical and emotional issues. There are medical and educational decisions, financial pressures, and time constraints — all likely to represent additional responsibilities for parents. And the inherent concern, disappointment, anger, self-recrimination and blame — typical emotions in response to a child's problem — also contribute to the pressures frequently disruptive to the family equilibrium and divisive to a marriage.

While some may think parental bonds are strengthened in the face of adversity, unfortunately, the opposite is true. Many parents have a difficult time accepting their child's problems and reconciling their own differences in response to them, while trying to manage daily life at home and in their respective careers. Parenting a child is never easy, but a strong relationship is required to withstand the additional stress of raising a child with special needs. This is even more challenging when one parent is given, or assumes, the role of case manager with less than maximum support from other family members.

A boy in my office, an eight-year-old with a variety of learning issues, seems to know just how to exasperate his mother. He's ready for a fight when she awakens him in the morning, refuses to get dressed until pushed and prodded, lets the hamster escape, and teases his sister until she cries — all before breakfast. Then he frequently misses the school bus, a great inconvenience for his mother who is late for work. His mother, in turn, has been criticized by her husband and even her parents for "being too easy on Jeremy," with the implication that she created his problems.

The reality, of course, is that she did not. Parents cannot cause a child's learning disabilities, nor can they cure them. They can indeed help but not by blaming one another or themselves.

In another family, a mother suspected her third child wasn't developing as quickly as his brothers had. His language was somewhat delayed, and he didn't seem the least bit interested in learning to read in first grade. Although Robbie's mother was concerned, his father insisted that nothing was wrong. He was convinced that Robbie was "just lazy," remembering that as a boy he had not liked school either.

When Robbie was in third grade, his father had unrealistic expectations for his son, refusing to believe that he couldn't achieve like his other children. "He's smart; I know he could do it if he tried harder," he would say. "I had similar problems when I was young."

“ It is a parent's response to a child as well as the child's qualities and traits that contribute to the personality of the family. ”

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He also had little patience with his wife's efforts to help their son. He accused her of "spoiling" Robbie and being "overprotective." He resented the time she spent on his homework, accusing her of contributing to Robbie's dependency and, therefore, to his disability. The resentment put an additional strain on the marital relationship and drove the father even further away from his son.

This story illustrates two points: The first is that parents, most frequently mothers, are the first to suspect that a child is "at risk" for learning, even before he enters school. They may not know to whom to turn for advice, though, particularly if their concerns are summarily dismissed by pediatricians, grandparents, and neighbors as merely "the anxious parent syndrome." The second point is that just as children need readiness to learn to walk and read, some fathers need time to accept and deal with the reality of a child's learning disability, particularly if they had similar problems when they were young. It is almost as if they were reliving those difficult years through their children — and it's painful.

“Parents can adjust family life to enhance a child's self-image and strengthen the family system overall.”

As we know, family members are interdependent. It is a parent's response to a child as well as the child's qualities and traits that contribute to the personality of the family. Yet too often, parents blame themselves, attributing their child's difficulties to their inept or inadequate parenting. In reality, children are born with temperaments and personalities that contribute to their interactions with each of their parents — and their siblings, as well.

Just as teachers modify classroom curriculum to accommodate children with special educational needs, parents can adjust family life to enhance a child's self-image and strengthen the family system overall. To begin this process, parents need to become consumers — to educate themselves about the nature and manifestations of their child's difficulties. Merely knowing that a child or adolescent has "LD" is of little help to anyone.

On the other hand, specific information about what the child can do and where problems are likely to occur will foster understanding and acceptance. I have seen many parents who acknowledged that in their ignorance, they were angry and even punitive with their child before identification of the problems, attributing behavior to laziness, resistance, or even defiance. However, once informed, they were able to share the burden with their child with LD, understand and accept the feelings of their other children, and educate members of the extended family. Everyone benefits!

Expert Answers

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How to Help Your Child Understand Learning Disabilities

How much should parents explain to children about their learning disabilities? Parents frequently express concern that telling a child too much about his learning disabilities will make the child become even more conscious of his difficulties and contribute to feelings of being "different." In this article, Betty Osman, Ph.D., discusses how to talk to a child about the problem.

In my experience, children are the first to know when a problem exists, even before they are identified and the results given to parents. They might not understand why they are capable in some areas, such as drawing, yet they struggle to learn to read and write. Many apply the vernacular of today's youth and call themselves "retarded," even if they are bright or intellectually gifted. Incidentally, **the more intelligent the child, the more intensely she may feel the frustration of learning disabilities.** She can't understand why she can't perform as her parents and teachers expect, and in all probability, is likely to feel isolated and alone with her problems.

“A child's feelings of isolation and inadequacy can be dealt with only if the lines of communication in the family are kept open.”

A child's feelings of isolation and inadequacy can be dealt with only if the lines of communication in the family are kept open. Many families, however, do not share their feelings or thoughts easily. Each individual keeps his feelings to himself, exchanging few words of significance with other family members in the course of a day, other than "Go to bed," "Time for dinner," or "Did you do your homework?"

In other families, the opposite is true; few subjects are taboo and almost no topic is off limits. There is time for open discussion, with feelings freely dispensed. But a child's learning disability frequently remains under wraps, classified information.

Parents may acknowledge their reluctance to talk about it, saying they don't want to call attention to their child's problems because "it will make her even more conscious of being different." In fact, this reasoning may, at least in part, be self-protection for parents who feel uncomfortable with the subject or do not know how to broach it with their child.

In all probability, the child feels different anyway, and her fantasies about her "problem" tend to be far worse than the reality. **Keeping the subject of a child's learning disability a secret only increases the mystery for the child and reinforces the idea that the problem is too terrible to talk about.** This, in turn, fosters a sense of shame about a problem that should be viewed as a fact of life to be dealt with and shared openly with the family.

Once parents recognize their child's problems and can acknowledge how they feel about them, they can alleviate a significant amount of the child's anxiety by talking to her as honestly as possible. Children need to know the truth, explained at their developmental level and in language they can understand. **By making learning disabilities a topic open for discussion, parents can help to relieve a child's guilt that arises from the perception of not feeling "smart" and, therefore, a disappointment to her family.** However, with acceptance and support at home, she'll be reassured that her troubles can't be so terrible if they can be discussed and will be less likely to invent frightening reasons for her

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difficulties. A child may also find unexpected allies in brothers and sisters if they understand the true nature of their sibling's problems. The whole family will benefit from talking about this formerly taboo subject.

Explaining the nature of learning disabilities to a child is admittedly not an easy task for parents. First, parents must become as knowledgeable as they can in order to talk to their child, focusing on her relative strengths as well as her areas of weakness. Understanding the ramifications of a child's LD is rarely, if ever, accomplished following one presentation of the findings in a professional's office. Rather it is a process, developing over time, with the aid of the school, professional consultations, and parent support groups. **Once comfortable with the subject, they can broach the topic with their child, not in terms of a label or classification, but rather where she has difficulties and what can be done to help.**

But when she says, "But I can't read; I'm the dumbest in my class," it doesn't help for parents to quickly jump in with an emphatic denial, "No, you're not, you're very smart." A more reassuring response might be a calm, "I'm sorry you feel that way, but I'm glad you can tell me how you feel. It must be hard to feel smart when reading (math or spelling) is hard. Your teacher and I know how bright you are, though, and I hope you will know it too before long."

When the subject of learning disabilities can be discussed openly in the family, the child with LD will feel supported and his burden shared. She will know that her learning problems are not a cause for shame in the family and will be better able to make the necessary effort to compensate for her difficulties.

In addition to explaining the nature of a child's problems to her, parents can support their child in other ways. A few suggestions are:

- **Praise for effort rather than only results.** Children with learning disabilities may apply more physical and psychological energy to a task than is readily apparent. Successive approximations toward the goal are also worthy of recognition.
- **When honestly given, compliments are vitamins to one's self-esteem** and probably should be dispensed in larger doses than usual for young people with learning disabilities.
- **Look for and find the child's strengths**, or as Bob Brooks, Ph.D., calls them, "islands of competence," preferably outside of an academic setting. Most children with LD can use the ego boost, and there is a secondary gain for parents, in deflecting some of the focus away from school.

The goal for informed parents, then, is to accept children with their differences, but with their unique qualities and special needs. Children know when they are appreciated and, conversely, when they are a disappointment and source of anguish for their parents. They have to know that even when you don't approve of their actions, you will be there with unconditional love.

Expert Answers

Learning Disabilities and Family Dynamics

How Learning Disabilities Affect a Child's Siblings

It's important for parents to talk about learning disabilities (LD) with their affected children and adolescents. Learning disabilities have an impact on all family members, yet there is a tendency to neglect the impact on siblings. In this article, Betty Osman, Ph.D., discusses how a child's learning problems affect the other children in the family, and how parents can help.

Although studies are inconclusive in assessing the impact of learning disabilities (LD) on siblings, it is generally acknowledged that the presence of a child with LD in the family affects the social and emotional development of siblings. While some brothers and sisters, usually adults, claim to have had a special and loving relationship with their sibling with LD, most children and adolescents appear to have complex and intense feelings about themselves, their sibling(s) with LD, and their families in general. Birth order, the attitude of parents, and family dynamics are influential factors.

According to a study by Trevino in 1979, (referenced in *Brothers and Sisters — A Special Part of Exceptional Families*), **adverse effects on siblings are more likely to occur in families in which:**

- There are only two children, one of whom has a disabling condition.
- The children are of the same sex and close in age.
- The child without the problem is the eldest female in the family.
- Parents cannot accept their child's LD.

Realistically, the child with learning disabilities in the family usually requires more parental time and attention. A sibling may become understandably resentful when his needs and bids for attention are overshadowed by those of his brother or sister. Each child in a family typically craves all the resources available from parents, and anyone vying for those resources is seen as unwelcome competition.

Then, too, parents tend to expect more of a sibling without learning disabilities, i.e., higher achievement in school, appropriate behavior in all settings, and even care taking of the sibling with LD. Because they are more able, parents may give them more responsibilities and rely on them, perhaps more than they realize, to ease the burden for the family.

Even when parents are sensitive to their children's needs and don't impose more responsibility than is appropriate, some siblings assume it for themselves. They try to be the "super-kids" in an attempt to compensate for the child with LD and preserve the "family ego." Some act as miniature parents for their brother or sister, assuming an overly protective role. Commendable as this is, it may be more than the child is prepared to handle and takes an emotional toll.

Another problem for many siblings of children and adolescents with LD is also largely self-imposed. It is the guilt they may feel for being "normal" and well functioning. "Why him and not me?" they ask,

“Even when parents are sensitive to their children's needs and don't impose more responsibility than is appropriate, some siblings assume it for themselves.”

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particularly in view of the hostile thoughts and angry feelings most brothers and sisters feel toward each other at times. Some boys and girls even become afraid to excel, for fear of retribution for surpassing their sibling. Parents may unwittingly support this in their effort to protect the child with LD. It seems to be the plight of many children with learning disabilities to have a brother or sister who is not only delightful but also precocious. That child's strengths need to be encouraged as well, even if it seems "unfair" to the sibling with LD.

Finally, children without problems may become overly anxious and worried, particularly in families where the subject of learning disabilities is taboo and not talked about. Many children are embarrassed in social situations by their brother or sister with LD, not knowing how to explain a problem they don't fully understand. Therefore, it is important for parents to keep the lines of communication open, including siblings in family discussions about this sensitive subject.

In my experience, most often brothers and sisters of children with LD are excluded from family discussions about learning disabilities and rarely are privy to either information about the child's disability or his special needs. Lacking knowledge, they can become resentful, anxious, and confused, with questions they may be afraid to ask. It is not uncommon for a young person to worry, "Is what my brother has contagious? If I'm bad will I get it, too?" or "Will I be responsible for my brother when my parents are old?" and, as a young adult with LD asked me recently, "Will my children be doubly affected if I marry a woman who also has learning disabilities? How great is the risk?"

In addition to their questions, siblings also need an opportunity to express their negative feelings about their brother or sister, difficult as this may be for parents. Some parents discourage children from talking about a sibling's learning disabilities, not only fearing the stigma, but the teasing and rejection of other children and/or their parents. Although their concerns are understandable, a sibling's lack of knowledge and information is even more detrimental. Generally, when siblings are included in discussions, they are likely to become more understanding and supportive of their brother or sister.

What, then, can parents do to help other children in the family become more accepting of a sibling who has learning disabilities? Here are a few suggestions:

- Inform the child as honestly as possible about their brother or sister's problem, not necessarily in terms of a label, but rather in descriptive terms at their level of understanding. Some children's books may be used for sharing and illustration:
 - *The Summer of the Swan* by William Allen White (about a trumpeter swan without a voice, i.e., a learning disability)
 - *Kelly's Creek* by Doris Buchanan Smith (a boy with learning disabilities who loves nature)
 - *When Learning is Tough* by Cynthia Roby (kids talk about their learning disabilities)
 - *The Survival Guide for Kids with LD* by Gary Fisher and Rhoda Cummings (practical questions and answers)
- Acknowledge and accept the child's feelings about her brother or sister with LD, understanding she must feel deprived of attention, jealous at times, and even resentful. Those feelings are normal and not a cause for guilt or recrimination.

“When siblings are included in discussions, they are likely to become more understanding and supportive of their brother or sister [with LD].”

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- Let your child know that he is not responsible for his sibling with LD and will only be asked to help when absolutely necessary.
- Find ways for each child in the family to gain recognition and a feeling of self-worth.
- Acknowledge they are separate people, appreciated and loved for who they are rather than for what they can achieve.

In other words, parents can create a safe and secure environment for siblings of children with LD by not expecting more of them than is appropriate, by informing them about learning disabilities, by answering their questions and concerns as honestly as possible, and by letting them know it is acceptable and safe to share their thoughts and feelings with you.

Expert Answers



Learning Disabilities and Family Dynamics

Encouraging Your Child with LD to Follow the Rules

Parents frequently complain their child with learning disabilities (LD) “doesn’t listen” to them or adhere to family rules. They have tried a variety of disciplinary measures but “nothing seems to work.” In this article, Betty Osman, Ph.D., tells parents what they can expect of their children with learning disabilities, and how to enforce expected standards of behavior.

Rule-governed behavior is a necessary part of family life and all children/adolescents, with or without LD, need standards and expectations. Parents do children no favor when they “feel sorry” for them because of their LD and make no demands. When expectations are realistic and standards maintained, children feel more competent and confident of success.

Most parents learn through experience how to manage their children with LD and, conversely, what does not work. Telling an adolescent to be home at six o’clock for dinner, for example, may not ensure that she’ll be there, particularly if she has problems with time and organization. A watch with an alarm or a phone call as a reminder will be more effective than a rebuke and a negative consequence when she is “late again.” In other words, **anticipation and advance preparation may be the key in many situations, in addition, of course, to parent-child communication .**

“Positive consequences ... have been shown to be ... effective in changing inappropriate behavior ”

Three Levels of Rules

Although families differ along the strictness-permissiveness continuum and have different standards for compliance, it might help to conceptualize three levels of family rules. The **first is the “have-to’s” in the family, i.e., the short list of rules that are not negotiable and must be followed** without debate or argument. These might include getting to school on time, using appropriate language in speaking to parents, and attending religious services, if that is a family value.

In the second level or category, a much longer list, are the “**should-but-don’t-have-to’s**.” A child should wear a coat if it is cold or pouring rain, for example, but it is not a “must” because you don’t get sick that way. Combing one’s hair and daily showers are appropriate, but they may be discussed and even negotiated.

The third category includes **children’s free choices** — clothing worn to school (within the school’s dress code, of course), with whom they spend leisure time, and the extracurricular activities they select. I have found when families write their lists cooperatively, children usually recognize they have more autonomy and decision-making than they previously thought. Children may think they want unlimited power, but it frightens them if they become omnipotent in the family. They feel more secure knowing their parents are authority figures whose job it is to protect them and keep them safe.

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Elements of Discipline

Although anticipation and prevention generally are more effective than criticism or punishment after the fact, parents can't always prevent an infraction or a child's disregard of an established rule. What then can parents do when disciplinary measures are called for and no consequence they impose seems to make an impression on the child or adolescent with LD?

First, it is important to remember that "discipline" literally means "teach" not "punish." Furthermore, as Rick Lavoie, a recognized authority on LD, negative consequences never change behavior, they only stop them in that particular time and setting. Positive consequences, on the other hand, have been shown to be far more effective in changing inappropriate behavior patterns. Children respond well to praise, encouragement, and positive reinforcement. Complimenting a child for a responsible, cooperative, or compassionate act will tend to promote that behavior.

“When expectations are realistic and standards maintained, children feel more competent and confident of success.”

There are occasions, however, when negative consequences become necessary. Insofar as possible, they should always be immediate, definite, and most of all, relevant. Young people with LD tend not to perceive cause and effect and are likely to have short memories, so prolonged punishments not only lose their impact, but also their effectiveness.

Taking away a child's favorite toy or the privilege of going to a movie for being rude to parents, for example, is not relevant to the infraction. The focus for the young person, then, becomes the lost toy or movie and his anger at his parents, rather than what he did to incur the punishment in the first place. A more appropriate consequence might be for the parent to respond, "I won't listen to that kind of talk," and walk away.

If a child leaves his bicycle outside overnight despite warnings to put it away, the child might not have the privilege of riding for one day, meeting the criteria of immediate, definite, and relevant.

And if the TV isn't turned off in timely fashion, taking away TV for that evening might serve well. (A caveat, though: parents cannot expect a child with LD to turn off television on command in the middle of a program. It is physically and psychologically impossible for him to make that transition. Rather it would be wise to ask him to turn off the set "after this show" or on the half-hour before dinner will be ready.)

Effective and Ineffective Disciplining Techniques

A word about the use of "time-outs," which were never intended to be used as punishment. Rather, the purpose was to remove a child from the offending stimulus. In this vein, a frustrated parent saying to a child, "I need a time-out because I'm feeling angry" or "We both need a time-out" conveys the message to the child that separation is in order to prevent an unpleasant confrontation, and both parties share the responsibility.

Teasing and threatening a child are not just ineffectual disciplinary measures, they are also highly destructive, particularly for children who are sensitive to criticism. Teasing, after all, can be an expression of hostility said with a smile, and most children quickly become aware of the underlying feelings. And clearly physical punishment does not work, except to exacerbate the child's anger and teach him violent retaliation is acceptable.

Encouraging Your Child with LD to Follow the Rules

In addition to advance preparation and mutual time-outs, two other techniques may be effective. The first is to ignore the undesirable behavior, withdrawing attention from the child. Children with LD crave attention, almost at any price, and negative attention certainly is more desirable than no attention. A second strategy is to model appropriate behavior, based on the principle that imitation is a basic form of learning, beginning in early childhood.

To sum up, disciplining a child or adolescent with LD is not an easy task, particularly in light of some of these characteristics commonly associated with learning disabilities:

- the inability to perceive cause and effect and to generalize from one situation to another
- a short memory for misdeeds but not for the consequences
- the tendency to blame others rather than assume responsibility for his behavior.

With patience, humor, and a sense of perspective, parents can become their child's ally, even in their role of authority.

Expert Answers

Learning Disabilities and Family Dynamics

Nurturing Social Competence in a Child with Learning Disabilities

Research has indicated that children with learning disabilities (LD) have more difficulty making and keeping friends than young people without these problems. Adolescents with LD have been shown to be less involved in recreational activities and to derive less satisfaction from their social interactions than their peers without LD. In this article, Betty Osman, Ph.D., discusses the nature of these social disabilities among children with LD, and what, if anything, can parents do to help their children and adolescents “fit in”.

Learning to successfully interact with others is one of the most important aspects of a child's development, with far-reaching implications. Although most children acquire social skills by example, and possibly osmosis, research clearly suggests children with learning disabilities (LD) may have difficulty making and keeping friends. Adolescents with LD have also been shown to interact less with their peers and to spend more leisure time alone, addicted to TV, computer games, and the Internet.

Parents devote much time and effort trying to impart the information and values they consider important. Yet, the development of children's social skills frequently is taken for granted. It goes without saying that it is painful for parents to see a child rejected by peers. In a sense, it becomes their rejection. Some parents relive their own unhappy social experiences as children, while others have expectations or dreams for their children that, not realized, become a source of disappointment and frustration.

Certainly not all young people with learning disabilities experience social problems. Typically, the good athlete, class comedian, resident artist, or owner of the most magic cards, is likely to be accepted regardless of his learning issues. Then, too, some children, with or without LD, seem born to make life easy for parents — and for themselves as well. They appear to develop social awareness early in life and, as they grow, display innately good “people skills” — a sense of humor, a positive attitude toward life, and empathy for others, qualities guaranteed to win friends.

But for many children and adolescents with LD, the lack of peer acceptance can become the most painful of their problems. Computers and calculators can help children with writing and arithmetic, but there is no similar technology to help them handle a lonely recess at school, a family outing, or a date. These require social competence.

“**Social competence**” in this context refers to those skills necessary for effective interpersonal functioning. They include both verbal and non-verbal behaviors that are socially valued and are likely to elicit a positive response from others.

Lack of these behaviors, though, does not represent a simple or unilateral problem. Rather, social disabilities might be conceptualized as occurring on three levels:

- The first is a **cognitive deficit**, i.e., lack of knowledge of how to act in a given social situation — knowing not to shout out in church, or when it is appropriate to offer assistance to a stranger.

“‘**Social competence**’ refers to those skills necessary for effective interpersonal functioning. They include both verbal and non-verbal behaviors that are socially valued ...”

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Intervention on this level consists of teaching the requisite skill in much the same way as a new math concept or social studies lesson might be presented.

- The second might be referred to as a **“performance deficit”** and can be seen in children or adolescents who understand both appropriate behavior and what is expected, but their own needs interfere with their cognitions. Some children who understand the concept of fair play and know they shouldn't cheat, simply can't tolerate losing, so they cheat to make sure that they win. The children have the skills but are unable to apply them.
- Still others with social difficulties know how to act and can suppress their needs appropriately, but they **lack the ability to evaluate their own or others' behavior**. They don't understand the effect of their actions and, therefore, have no means of monitoring what they do or say. Each experience is a new one, with little transfer or generalization taking place. Anticipation and cause and effect are non-existent.

“ Although each young person is unique, all have the same needs — acceptance, approval, and a sense of belonging. ”

In sum, young people with social disabilities frequently are less able than others their age to figure out how to behave in social situations and less aware of how others respond to them. Therefore, they act without knowledge or regard for social consequences. Most, though, tend to be unaware of their role, perceiving themselves as the victims of others' mistreatment. Therefore, they take little responsibility for their actions, blaming others or simply “bad luck” for events in their lives. What they do feel, though, is an overdose of criticism from peers and adults alike.

To help young people with social problems, it is important to understand on what level they are having trouble and how their social disabilities relate to their learning disabilities. The immaturity of many children with LD transcends academic areas, affecting their social adjustment as well. Communication skills, both verbal and non-verbal, also have social implications. Children who don't “read” body language and facial expressions well are likely to miss important signals in life that are apparent to others.

Parents cannot afford to ignore their children's social difficulties. The consequences are too great for the child and the family. I view the social domain, along with academic instruction, as within the realm of educational responsibility at home and at school. Education, after all, is not confined to the classroom but occurs in all aspects of life.

To help children/adolescents develop social skills and promote social acceptance, parents might consider these techniques:

- Listen to children with the “third ear,” i.e., active listening, not only to the words they say, but the feelings they are expressing.
- Initiate and practice pro-social skills at home, including:
 - how to initiate, maintain, and end a conversation
 - the art of negotiation — how to get what you want appropriately
 - how to be appropriately assertive without being overly aggressive
 - how to give and receive compliments

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- o how to respond to teasing by peers
- o practice how to accept constructive criticism

If there is a social support group in your area, encourage your child to participate. Sharing concerns, problems, and social experiences can facilitate social skills and peer acceptance.

Although not all children and adolescents with learning disabilities incur social difficulties, those who do require special understanding, not only in terms of their current functioning, but for the people they are capable of becoming. Although each young person is unique, all have the same needs — acceptance, approval, and a sense of belonging. To truly help them, we must go beyond the 3 R's to include the Fourth R — Relationships.

Expert Answers



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How to Help Your Child Deal with Homework Challenges

How much help with homework should parents of kids with learning disabilities provide? Teachers generally encourage parents to adopt a "hands-off" policy, wanting students to complete schoolwork independently. On the other hand, when assignments are incomplete or missing, teachers often call parents, giving them the responsibility of overseeing their child's work. In this article, Betty Osman, Ph.D., describes the extent to which parents should become involved with their children's school assignments.

Homework has been part of U.S. education system since the beginning of this century, but in recent years the amount of homework expected of young people has increased exponentially. It is not unusual for today's first graders to have homework that is both challenging and time-consuming. Although many young people need (or want) a parent's help with homework from time to time, children with learning disabilities (LD), particularly those in "inclusive classrooms," are likely to require extra time and more assistance to complete assignments. They tend to resist homework, procrastinate on starting assignments, and perceive themselves as less competent than their peers.

Parents frequently express their concern and confusion about how much homework-help they should provide for their children. I think the answer becomes clearer when we think about the purpose of homework.

According to an article in *The American School Board Journal* (October, 1996), there are three reasons for homework:

- to provide practice and reinforce previous instruction
- to develop student responsibility
- to involve parents directly in supporting their children's learning (There is evidence that children are more successful in school when parents are involved in their education.)

With regard to the first purpose, that of reinforcing skills taught in school, a parent might ask, "Has my child learned the requisite skill and is he capable of completing the work independently?" (I have seen children with reading and writing disabilities who receive daily remediation in school and then are given lengthy book reports for homework.)

It may also be unrealistic to expect a child to do homework alone as the requirements of the classroom become more challenging. Like it or not, a parent (or surrogate) may have to share the burden of homework if the child is to succeed academically.

Most parents of children with learning disabilities would agree that, although the will to help is strong, the emotional involvement with one's own child can make helping with homework difficult. As one parent said, "Homework is an activity that involves reading, math, and parent testing."

If a child is a competent student, it is relatively easy for a parent to edit a composition or quiz her for a test. But when learning is a struggle and material learned one minute is forgotten the next, it is frustrating for the parent, as well as the child. This frustration is exacerbated when an exhausted parent

How to Help Your Child Deal with Homework Challenges

is summoned at nine o'clock at night to help a child with homework he has forgotten or put off until the last minute. A parent's natural instinct at that point may be a fight-or-flight response.

The most obvious indication of trouble with a subject is when the books don't come home at all. "I don't have any homework" or "I must have left it on the bus (or in school)" are two of the common ways children express their dislike of homework or their fear that they can't do it. As a second grader said through his tears one day, "It's just not fair! We work hard in school all day and then have homework, and my teacher isn't even there!"

Then there are some children who actually do their homework but "forget" to hand it in. Translated, this usually means they feel inadequate relative to their classmates, are ashamed of their work, or want to punish themselves, their teachers, or their parents. That's what psychologists call being "passive-aggressive." It's not what the children do that is troubling; it's what they don't do that makes us angry.

Here are strategies parents can use to effectively help with homework, with a minimum of frustration for both parent and child:

- **Make sure assignments come home.** A daily planner or sheet signed by the teacher may remind a reluctant student of an assignment. As one child said, "It helps me remember when my mind wants to forget."
- **Establish where homework should be done.** This does not necessarily mean in a child's room seated at his desk. Some children really dislike being alone in a quiet room, particularly when they have a task to perform that they don't like — and homework usually fits that description. Help your child find a corner of his own, whether on the kitchen floor or on his bed with a lap desk to lean on.
- **Establish when homework should be done.** Right after a long day at school may not be the best time. Most children need "a break," in the form of a snack, a bicycle ride, or social time with friends. It is important to be clear, though, about the time to return home (an alarm watch or phone call might ensure compliance). For many children, the hours just before or after dinner are best for homework. That way, there are no midnight surprises. Some children can rise early in the morning to complete an unfinished assignment, while others work better with the privilege of staying up a little later at night.
- **Contrary to common belief, listening to music on the radio may actually help the young person focus on a task.** As one woman said, "When I have to concentrate, I turn on the radio to screen out my internal noises." (TV, however, is not included!) In some instances, merely having a parent present in the room may be sufficient, providing the comfort and company the child needs, even if dad is reading his newspaper.
- **Remember that every child eventually reaches his saturation point.** There's an old saying, "The brain can only absorb as much knowledge as the seat can endure." Parents have to recognize when a child is tired and has reached the point of diminishing returns. That is the time to stop homework, and let the teacher know the child did as much as he could. It is also a good idea to ask your child's teacher how much time he should be expected to spend on homework and be guided accordingly. For some children with learning disabilities, the challenge is the length of the homework rather than the difficulty of the assignment.

“Children with LD, particularly those in 'inclusive classrooms,' are likely to require extra time and more assistance to complete assignments.”

How Can a Parent Deal with Homework Challenges?

- Rather than have children attempt an assignment and then ask parents for help when it is not understood or isn't done, **I recommend that a parent start a child on the homework, to ascertain that she understands it.** One or two math problems solved together or a composition started is reassuring for a child and should preclude the need to relearn the material and redo the assignment. Once children feel secure, they usually can finish a task independently and gain confidence in the process.
- **Provide assistive tools when possible**, such as a calculator or even a parent scribing for a young child for whom written work is challenging. With the teacher's sanction, you can act as your child's "secretary" until he becomes more facile with handwriting and/or the computer.
- And finally, **respect your own feelings and ability to work with your child.** If working together is contraindicated, with either you or your child angry or in tears, it is better to be your child's good and supportive parent than a frustrated, ineffective teacher.

In sum, parents can expect that children with learning disabilities will require more guidance, more assistance, and probably more support than their classmates for whom learning is easier. But we should try to keep homework from becoming the focus of family life and the most dreaded word of the day.

Expert Answers

Learning Disabilities and Family Dynamics

Resources & References

Learning Disabilities and Family Dynamics

Books

Raising Resilient Children

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0809297647/>

By Robert Brooks, Ph.D. & Sam Goldstein, Ph.D.

Nurturing Resilience in Our Children (Contemporary Books, 2002)

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0658021109/>

By Robert Brooks, Ph.D. & Sam Goldstein, Ph.D.

Learning Disabilities and ADHD: A Family Guide to Living and Learning Together

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0471155101/ref=nosim/>

By Betty B. Osman, Ph.D.

The Misunderstood Child: Understanding and Coping with Your Child's Learning Disabilities

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/081292987X/>

By Larry B. Silver, M.D.

No Easy Answers: The Learning Disabled Child at Home and at School

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0553354507/ref=nosim/>

By Sally L. Smith

On the Web

National Center for Learning Disabilities: Learning Disabilities: A Family Affair —
An Interview with Dr. Betty Osman

<http://www.ld.org/newsltr/0803newsltr/0803feature1.cfm>

Helping Kids Understand Learning Disabilities

Books

When You Worry About the Child You Love

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0684832682/>

By Edward Hallowell, M.D.

Many Ways to Learn : Young People's Guide to Learning Disabilities

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0945354746/>

By Judith M. Stern, M.A., Uzi Ben-Ami, Ph.D., & Michael Chesworth

Resources & References

Effect of Learning Disabilities on Siblings

Books

Siblings Without Rivalry: How to Help Your Children Live Together So You Can Live Too

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0380799006/>

By Adele Faber & Elaine Mazlish

Learning Disabilities and ADHD: A Family Guide to Living and Learning Together

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0471155101/>

By Betty B. Osman

Living With a Brother or Sister With Special Needs: A Book for Sibs

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0295975474/>

By Patricia Vadasy & Donald Joseph Meyer

Brothers and Sisters — A Special Part of Exceptional Families

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1557661103/>

By Thomas F. Powell & Peggy Ahrenhold Gallagher

Following Rules

Books

1-2-3 Magic: Effective Discipline for Children 2-12

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0963386190/>

By Thomas W. Phelan Ph.D.

SOS: Help for Parents

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0935111204/>

By Lynn Clark, John Robb (Illustrator)

When Anger Hurts Your Kids: A Parent's Guide

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1572240458/>

By Matthew McKay (Editor)

Social Competence

Books

No One to Play With

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0878796878/>

By Betty B. Osman, Ph.D.

Good Friends are Hard to Find

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/096220367X/>

By Fred Frankel

On the Web

NYU Child Study Center:

Social Life in Middle and High School: dealing with clicks and bullies (pdf)

http://www.aboutourkids.org/aboutour/letter/2005/sept_oct.pdf

Resources & References

Social Competence (*continued*)

Videos

Last One Picked, First One Picked On

<http://ldonline.learningstore.org/products/LD1002.html>

By Rick Lavoie

Homework Challenges

Books

The End of Homework: How Homework Disrupts Families, Overburdens Children, and Limits Learning

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0807042196/>

By Etta Kralovec & John Buell

Learning Disabilities and ADHD: A Family Guide to Living and Learning Together

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0471155101/>

By Betty B. Osman, Ph.D.

The Misunderstood Child: A Guide for Parents of Learning Disabled Children

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/081292987X/>

By Larry B. Silver, M.D.

Reference

The Truth about Homework: What the Research Says Might Surprise You. By Susan Black.

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