

Research Reveals Success Attributes in Kids with Learning Disabilities

by Marshall Raskind, Ph.D.

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Articles

page **1** **How Do Kids with LD Become Successful?**

page **3** **Specific Success Attributes among Individuals with Learning Disabilities**

page **6** **How Parents Can Help Their Kids Develop Success Attributes**

page **10** **The Implications of Success Attribute Research for Kids with Learning Disabilities**

Resources

page **12** **Books, Articles, and Websites**



Marshall H. Raskind, Ph.D. is a learning disability researcher. He is a frequent presenter at international learning disability conferences and is the author of numerous professional publications on learning disabilities. He is well-known for his research in assistive technology and longitudinal studies tracing LD across the lifespan.

Expert Answers



Research Reveals Success Attributes in Kids with LD

How Do Kids With LD Become Successful?

In this article, Marshall Raskind, Ph.D., based on his research of success attributes in people with learning disabilities, defines what success is and describes how kids with learning disabilities can become successful adults.

Success is really not easy to define. It really means different things to different people and it may mean different things at different times in a person's life. That said, I still think we can find certain commonalities among people in terms of the factors that might be considered important to being a successful individual, such things as having good friends, positive family relations, being loved, self-approval, job satisfaction, having physical and mental health, financial comfort, spiritual contentment, and an overall sense of meaning to one's life.

At the Frostig Center, where we've been doing our research on success attributes and learning disabilities, we have developed what we refer to as a multidimensional view of success. We include many things in that. Success here includes, again, positive relationships with one's family, positive relationships with peers, good feelings about oneself, life satisfaction, success in employment, and educational success, as well. In regard to the second question that you asked, "How do children with learning disabilities become successful adults?", we have to keep in mind that children with learning disabilities really become adults with learning disabilities, and the problems they have in childhood continue into and through adulthood.

“The success attributes... were more predictive of success than variables ... like academic achievement and IQ.”

It's been interesting for us to watch kids grow up over the years and move into adulthood. One of the things that we've seen and one of the things we've had questions about is why do some individuals with disabilities end up doing well employment-wise, have good peer relations, family seems to be doing well, and who could be called "successful," while another group with similar backgrounds and similar types of disabilities may end up in really a difficult situation, barely able to keep their heads above water either emotionally, socially, or financially? So we're interested in why that happens, what factors or attributes contribute to success, and what things really stand in the way of success. There have been a number of research studies, including our own, which I'll mention in a minute, that have pointed to a number of factors, personal characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors that lead persons with learning disabilities to successful life outcomes.

Some of the other studies that have been done in addition to our own have been by Dr. Paul Gerber of Virginia Commonwealth University and Dr. Emmy Werner at the University of California, Davis. In our own study, we tracked over a 20-year period a group of individuals who had been identified at an early age as having learning disabilities.

In this research, we really tried to get as much information as we could directly "from the horse's mouth." We conducted two- to six-hour interviews in areas of social relationships, family and dependents, psychological health, education, and employment. We also went through diagnostic records over 20 years, case records, and even public records — voter registration and court records

How Do Kids With LD Become Successful?

— to get some additional information about how they were doing and, ultimately, why. We made an effort to determine which individuals were successful, which ones weren't successful, and then to see if we could really pin down exactly why some were led to successful paths and others were still really struggling.

We were able to identify a number of **success attributes**, and I think one of the interesting things is that we were actually able to do that mathematically, statistically. We could really analyze things to a point where we could say that these specific success attributes lead to successful life outcomes. Now, some individuals who are successful will not necessarily have every single attribute, and other individuals who are not successful may have some of the attributes. The idea is that successful individuals are more likely to possess these attributes. And **these attributes are** — and we're going to go through these in a little bit more detail — but let me name them for you first:

- self-awareness
- proactivity
- perseverance
- goal setting
- the presence and use of effective support systems
- emotional coping strategies

Now, again, these success attributes don't guarantee success, but just increase the likelihood of more successful life outcomes. I think one of the things that was very fascinating is that the success attributes I just mentioned were more predictive of success than variables (as we refer to them) like academic achievement and IQ.

One of the things that we really hope we can do is sensitize parents to these attributes so parents can help foster these various elements, values, and behaviors in their children, to, hopefully, lead them to more successful life outcomes.

Expert Answers



Research Reveals Success Attributes in Kids with LD

Specific Success Attributes among Individuals with Learning Disabilities

In this article, Marshall Raskind, Ph.D., describes the specific success attributes he and his colleagues identified in their research among individuals with learning disabilities.

Let me start with self-awareness. The successful individuals in our study were very aware of their strengths and their weaknesses, whether they were in academic areas like reading and math, or in non-academic areas like their emotional states, or in their physical functioning and coordination. Also included were various academic-related things like attention and organization. So, successful people were very aware of their strengths and limitations. They were very open and specific about these. They could discuss them very easily. But probably one of the key elements regarding self-awareness was the successful individual's ability to do what we call "compartmentalize" their disability. What that really means is that they are able to see their difficulties as only one aspect of themselves. They were not overly defined by their difficulties. I have a quote that is an example of this from a woman in our study, about 33 years old. She said, "You know, everybody comes with a package. And, yeah, there are things that I am good at and things that I am not so good at. Some of my limitations are reading and writing, but boy, when it comes to putting things together, reading plans, and chasing down problems, those are some talents, some skills that I was born with. I carved a different path and my whole life has been that way."

I think that's a pretty good example of being able to say, "Yes, I have this difficulty, but it's not going to limit me or really keep me down. I see it as only one part of myself." It's one thing to be aware of your problems; it's another thing to be able to accept them, and that's another thing that we found with our successful individuals — they were able to do both.

They really came to a level of acceptance of their problems, their strengths, and their weaknesses, and were able to integrate those ideas and feelings into themselves. Now, another interesting area has to do with the individuals' strengths and weaknesses and how they matched those strengths and weaknesses to the activities they pursued in their life. I think employment is a good example. We often call this "niche picking."

The idea here is that successful individuals with learning disabilities are able to recognize their strengths and limitations and find the jobs and employment situations that best fit their strengths and limitations. So, for example, you have an individual who has exceptional skills in woodworking. They might find a successful career in cabinetmaking, rather than knowing that they also have great difficulties with reading and writing and trying to be a copy editor.

It seems kind of obvious, but it was amazing how many times we saw individuals who were not doing that well who had great difficulty in making that match. Along the same lines, you might find someone with very poor reading and writing skills, but excellent oral language skills, who decides to pursue a career in sales, rather than a job that really requires them do a lot of reading and writing. And, again, the unsuccessful individuals had great difficulty in niche picking, or trying to make this match.

The next success attribute is proactivity. And you may remember that word. I think it was quite in vogue in the business community. But what we refer to as proactivity has to do with being actively engaged in the world, politically, economically, and socially involved in community activities. This is one of the things that the successful individuals with learning disabilities were able to do. They were really a part of

Specific Success Attributes among Individuals with Learning Disabilities

a number of communities. And with this involvement came the idea that they could control their own destiny, that they could affect the outcome of their lives. They were active players in their own lives, as opposed to many unsuccessful individuals who really responded to events, were passive in their lives, and were more “victims.”

And along with that, they were also individuals who would tend to blame other people for the problems that they were having, unlike the successful individuals, who assumed responsibility for their actions and the outcomes of their actions.

Again, these are attributes and behaviors and attitudes that are important for anyone, for all children, but especially for kids with LD.

The next attribute that we found in our study has to do with — I often think of the Eveready Energizer™ bunny that just keeps on going and going and going — is perseverance. They don't give up. Now, I do have to say that even those individuals who were eventually termed “unsuccessful” — and I want to be really careful with the term “unsuccessful” because, remember, these were ratings that we made in our research based on a multidimensional view of success that, in other settings, environments, or countries, might not be seen as unsuccessful. But, at least for our purposes, the unsuccessful individuals, while they also persevered, would say things like, “I'm not a quitter. I'll never give up.” The successful individuals, on the other hand, demonstrated an additional ability of knowing when to quit.

I'm somehow struck by how the successful individuals also knew when they needed to shift gears. While they generally didn't give up on an overall goal, they knew when to back up a little bit or change the path a little bit to get there.

The unsuccessful individuals, on the other hand, would just keep beating their heads against the wall and not recognize when it was time to reevaluate the strategies or, in some cases, the goal itself. The successful individuals would say things like, “I have failed many times. I am not a failure. I have learned to succeed from my failure.” There was this idea that they could fail, pick themselves up, and get going again. They weren't overly defeated, whereas some of the unsuccessful kids really were overwhelmed by adversity and, in many cases, finally just gave up or kept beating their heads against the wall.

Goal setting was another one of the success attributes. The successful individual set very specific yet flexible goals. Again, the idea here is that they could adjust goals to fit certain circumstances and situations. These goals were in such areas as employment and family, spiritual goals, and personal development. And in many cases, they were set, at least tentatively, in adolescence. They also developed a strategy for reaching their goals and really understood the step-by-step process for attaining those goals. I have a quote from about a 30-year-old man, who made this statement, “I always look at every move. Like this particular move doing the video as a stepping stone for the next project. That's how I'm looking at it. As I said, the area I really want to move into is to direct.” This person had a very clear picture of where he wanted to go, and how to get there.

They have to have something in mind, they have to be flexible in terms of how they're going to reach that goal, and they have to have an appreciation and understanding of the step-by-step process for reaching that goal. A lot of children with learning disabilities need support and help to be able to do that.

The next success attribute has to do with the presence and use of effective support systems. And I think what I'll do is finish a little bit with the goal setting because it's a nice transition. The successful individuals

“... successful individuals ... 'compartmentalize' their disability ... they are able to see their difficulties as only one aspect of themselves. They were not overly defined by their difficulties.”

Specific Success Attributes among Individuals with Learning Disabilities

also had very realistic and attainable goals. And the individuals who often supported them also had set realistic and attainable goals for them. So the people who were around them and helping to guide them also had a sense of realism. And it's a little bit scary when that sense of realism is not there. We had one individual — and I don't mean to make light of it because there's really a sobering side to it as well — but I had one individual who came in and said, "Marshall, I finally figured out what I'm going to do." And I said, "What are you going to do?" He said, "I'm going to be a professional golfer. I just watched this great golf game and I saw the winner win all this money, and this is what I'm going to dedicate my life to." And I said, "Oh, gee, how long have you been golfing?" And he said, "Well, I haven't started yet."

So the whole idea was that he was very intrigued with this goal but was not very realistic about it. And that does concern us.

Both the successful and the unsuccessful individuals receive support from others. We saw that successful individuals eventually move away from that support and they were able to decrease their dependence on others while that was not something that the unsuccessful individuals could do. Many of them had difficulty cutting that cord and remained highly dependent on others.

The successful individuals were more able to do that, starting at an earlier age, as well. And the successful kids also actively sought support from other individuals. They didn't simply wait around hoping that somebody would eventually help them, which is something that many of the unsuccessful individuals did do. They just waited passively.

The last success attribute has to do with emotional coping strategies. And we know that learning disabilities can, in the course of a lifetime, produce a lot of frustration and difficulties. In some cases it may be so significant, the stress of living with a learning disability, that an individual develops anxiety and even depression.

What we saw in the successful individuals was that they had developed effective means of reducing and coping with the stress and frustration and other emotional aspects of having a learning disability. There appeared to be three key components in this process. They were aware of the situations that triggered the stress. Secondly, they also had an awareness of the developing stress that had started building up. And thirdly, they had access to, even if it was internal, a repertoire of coping strategies.

So, to give you a more specific example, we had one individual in our study who experienced anxiety attacks. And she knew — so this is the first component here — that reading aloud in a group was one of the key triggers producing anxiety. She also then was aware — which has to do with the recognition of the developing stress, that was our second component — that as she started getting more and more stressed or more and more anxious, she would start feeling herself breathing more and more rapidly and maybe ultimately even hyperventilating. But the key here is that she also had developed strategies. In this case, she had been working on a number of deep breathing strategies that helped calm her down and reduce her anxiety. So those three things — in terms of reducing that stress and frustration — were really paramount to her success. Now again, that's just one example. There are many things that the successful individuals did as far as the development of coping strategies. In some cases, it was seeking counseling. It was asserting oneself, utilizing peer support, planning ahead for difficult situations. In some cases, it was just a matter of getting their feelings out, or sharing those feelings with members of their family or peer group.

Expert Answers



Research Reveals Success Attributes in Kids with LD

How Parents Can Help Their Kids Develop Success Attributes

In this article, Marshall Raskind, Ph.D., explains how parents can determine if their kids possess the personal attributes needed to become successful and how can kids develop those attributes.

There aren't any specific tests or scientific procedures for determining whether or not your child has particular success attributes. However, I do think there are some questions that parents can ask. And I would say that the more "yes" responses you get to a specific set of questions, the more likelihood that your child would have a particular attribute. So maybe we can go through some of the success attributes, think about them in terms of, "Well, what are some of the questions that could be asked to see if my child has these attributes," and then talk about some of the things that you might be able to do to help develop them or foster them in a child.

So if we look at **self-awareness**, some of the questions that a parent might ask are:

- Is my child aware of his or her academic strengths, academic weaknesses, and non-academic strengths and weaknesses?
- Are they aware of their special talents, abilities, and interests?
- Do they really understand their learning disability?
- Do they accept their learning disability?
- Can they "compartmentalize" their learning disability, that is, can they think of the disability as just one part of who they are, not the defining part of their identity?

The more "yes" responses to those questions, the more likely it is that the child already has a sense of self-awareness. There is not a lot of research regarding the extent to which these attributes can be taught or learned by individuals, but there is some research to suggest that we might be able to do something to promote them. And we do work [to promote success attributes] at various times, although maybe not enough in educational settings and counseling settings.

In regard to self-awareness, you need to think in terms of both general self-awareness and awareness of the learning disability. So under general self-awareness, I think you want to help a child to understand what self-awareness is and the importance of developing awareness of their personal strengths and weaknesses in various areas. Awareness of their feelings, helping them to develop their own definition of success, and to develop those "niche picking" skills that we talked about before. Are they really aware of how their strengths and weaknesses may fit into certain environments? I can relate a little anecdote about an individual who had great difficulty in niche picking: He had terrible spatial relations skills and visual problems, but was determined that he was going to be an airline pilot. So, again, they also need self-awareness specifically in regard to their learning disabilities. So, do they have an understanding of their specific learning disability and how it affects their life? Are they aware of, and have they developed various strategies that they can utilize? Have they come to accept and compartmentalize their learning disability, as well?

Far too often, we're focusing just on self-awareness in regard to school. So we're talking here not just about success attributes as they relate to school success. We're talking ultimately about life success, and

How Parents Can Help Their Kids Develop Success Attributes

that's one of the things we keep wanting to stress. In order to gain the highest level of self-awareness, [we need to] think not just in terms of the school environment but focus on self-awareness in regard to their social and emotional makeup, and physically, socially, in terms of their communication, and even in terms of their philosophy of life and their personal values and ethics. These are all things that are key, we believe, to self-understanding.

The next attribute that parents may want to look at is **proactivity**. They may want to think about these questions:

- Does my child participate in classroom activities and extracurricular activities?
- Does he make decisions and act upon those decisions?
- Does he take responsibility for his decisions?
- Is he assertive?
- Is he self-confident?

“You need to think in terms of both general self-awareness and awareness of the learning disability.”

And, again, parents should think about these questions not just in regards to school, but socially and, ultimately, although parents often don't think about it — employment for their kids. Hopefully proactivity will positively affect employment situations, family situations, and even recreation and leisure. So one of the key areas that they may want to help guide their child in is understanding proactivity.

I repeatedly touch on this idea of understanding the attribute itself. What does it mean? And what's the importance of it? What benefits can be reaped from pursuing or developing these various attributes? Parents want to help their child to make decisions and act upon those decisions, evaluate them, understand the pros and cons of making certain decisions. One of the things that we've seen in our work — and other people are talking more and more about it — is helping kids to become self-advocates. It's really trying to help them develop a sense where they can speak up for themselves and help direct their own destiny, so to speak. We believe that's really, really important.

In regard to **perseverance**, we take the same kind of approach:

- Does my child understand perseverance?
- Do they know what it means?
- Do they understand the benefits of persevering — and persevering in a number of different areas?
- Do they know how to deal with obstacles and setbacks?
- Do they know how to adjust to change?
- Do they know when to quit?

And we should help them think about all those things in terms of the educational, psychological, employment settings, social settings, even recreation and leisure settings. So parents might want to work with their children on: “What does perseverance mean? How can it benefit me? What are the strategies for dealing with the obstacles?” One thing that kept emerging in the study is recognizing the importance of passion, and desire, and interest in particular areas. That can be so important to these kids, particularly when they may be having such difficulty in academic settings, to find other areas that are important, whether it's in the arts, in dance, in music, in drawing. And we find in many cases so

How Parents Can Help Their Kids Develop Success Attributes

many of these kids have great talents in other areas that are really not emphasized and are really key to their success. Many of us have been able to follow our passions, desires, and interests. This goes along with niche picking. And when we're able to match those special abilities and talents to the proper setting, we tend to be more successful.

So parents should encourage their children in their passions and help them develop them — and move their thinking beyond school. Unfortunately, because there is such a strong emphasis on the school environment, we're always hitting on the kids' deficits. You know: What's not working right? What's going wrong? But it's equally important — maybe in some cases even more important — to encourage those things that are really working well for them, and those things that they love.

So the boy or girl who's a wonderful athlete should be encouraged to participate in after school sports or team sports, for example. I mean, I don't want to make it so simplistic that you don't have to consider all aspects of their lives, depending on what else they have to do, but we really do believe that's important, because if it becomes just strictly academics, they're really not going to be able to tap into their strengths and desires. Clearly, it doesn't sound like a great way to live, to always be focusing just on your deficits. That's why we talk about life success, right? There is **life** beyond school.

Goal setting is the same kind of idea. This is where parents want to look at whether or not their kids tend to set goals, whether it's in an academic or non-academic setting:

- Do they know how to prioritize?
- Are their goals realistic?
- Do they know the various steps to reach certain goals?
- Do they understand the necessity to work with others to reach those goals?

Moving, again, beyond the educational realm, but knowing that they want to consider goal setting in regard to, let's say, physical health, psychological health, financial goals, independent living goals, or goals in the social arena. Some of the things parents can do along those lines is to help children:

- Develop the various strategies for setting goals
- Define a goal
- Understand the importance of setting goals
- Prioritize goals
- Look ahead to possible obstacles or road blocks before they happen.

In so many cases, the individuals who were not successful would just get blindsided, kind of running into a brick wall without having any kind of premonition or forethought about that.

“We need to... focus on self-awareness in ... their social and emotional makeup, and physically, socially, in terms of their communication, and even in terms of their philosophy of life and their personal values and ethics. These ... are key ...to self-understanding.”

How Parents Can Help Their Kids Develop Success Attributes

Likewise, in regard to the presence and use of **effective support systems**:

- Does my child know when he needs help?
- Does he know how to get help?
- Does he have various compensatory strategies — in some cases, technological supports?

So, to review, parents want to ensure that kids understand the benefits of using support systems, recognize the various signs when they're in need of help, learn how to accept help, and develop trust in others. Also, I think there needs to be — and we found this in many of the individuals who were successful — an awareness of the various laws that protect them within our country — and there are many laws that really can help them reach their goals — and they need to gain an awareness of those federal laws, in some cases state laws, that can be of use to them.

For example, special education laws and, as they move into the employment arena, there are a number of federal laws that will help protect them within employment settings. As they move into post-secondary settings, there's federal legislation that can be very helpful to them in optimizing their post-secondary experience.

The final area is **emotional coping strategies**, and parents can ask themselves:

- Is my child aware of the situations that produce stress?
- Do they have various strategies for alleviating that stress?
- Do they know where to get help?
- Do they know when to get help?

And moving beyond the school environment, kids have got to think about stress in a number of situations. The question is: Can parents and educators help children develop these coping strategies? We think that they certainly can. We know that therapists and psychologists and child counselors have been doing this for years. So we're pretty optimistic that you can help children to recognize the stress triggers and develop various coping strategies in that area.

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Research Reveals Success Attributes in Kids with LD

The Implications of Success Attribute Research for Kids with Learning Disabilities

In this article, Marshall Raskind, Ph.D., describes the implications of the success attribute research for the education of children with learning disabilities.

I think that we should focus on not only academics, but on the success attributes as well. Noting that success attributes were highly predictive of life success — not just school success — we wanted to provide some equal exposure to and equal time to understanding and promoting the development of the success attributes. Now, don't get me wrong here; I am not suggesting in any way that we stop working on academics—reading, writing, and math. Nor am I trying to undermine any of those efforts. I think it's important to recognize that kids with learning disabilities grow up, and we probably need to spend a little bit more time on the development of some of the success attributes because this is important if we're considering life beyond school.

“Many of the people we talked to felt ... tremendous gratitude and appreciation towards their parents.”

One of the other findings of the study that's not specifically related to the success attributes but did emerge after talking and working with these individuals for so many years is that the stress of having a learning disability tended to be reduced after high school.

That is wonderful news — and maybe not so wonderful, in the sense we see the kind of stress that they're constantly under within the educational setting. But knowing that once they get out of that setting — and this was true even of individuals who went into post-secondary settings where they had more of an opportunity to take the classes they wanted and pursue the things that they wanted to pursue there is a possibility that “Gee, maybe things won't be so bad once I get out, and maybe my life can kind of take a different course.” This is something to look forward to for many of these individuals. We'd like to share that finding and hopefully help young people understand that, yeah, there is life beyond school and that life could really be wonderful.

And for parents to know that as well; that things really can change, and that the stress and anxiety and frustration may actually be reduced.

Other Study Results that Might be of Interest to Parents

One of the things I would really like parents to hear is that so many of the people we talked to felt such tremendous gratitude and appreciation towards their parents. Now, they may have not necessarily felt that way in childhood and those turbulent adolescent years, or they may not have been able to express it, but they had such great appreciation for all the efforts that their parents made on their behalf. And I think parents really need to know that, they need to hear that. It can be so difficult at times raising a child who has learning difficulties, so it's important to know that those efforts are going to be appreciated and probably are being appreciated even at the time.

I actually have a couple of quotes that I can share which I think are indicative of some of these feelings. One of the individuals in our study says, “My mom was the one to come in and talk to all the teachers

The Implications of Success Attribute Research for Kids with Learning Disabilities

and all the principals. She was always the one to take me around and to stay there with me. Gee, I can't imagine, at times, how stressful that was for her, but I never felt that."

Another individual states, "My father really cared. He wanted me to have the best and he did. He made sure of that. He always gave me the self-confidence and self-esteem that I lacked in myself. He made me feel that I was able to do anything that I wanted to do." And, again, I think it's really important to stress to parents the sacrifices that moms and dads made for the kids in our study and the tremendous efforts that they made helped them carve out a path towards success.

Expert Answers



Research Reveals Success Attributes in Kids with LD

Resources

Websites

Life Success For Children With Learning Disabilities: A Parent Guide

<http://www.ldsuccess.org/>

SchwabLearning.org:

Positive Attitude Trumps IQ, Good Grades as Success Predictor for LD Adults

<http://www.schwablearning.org/articles.asp?r=622>

Books

Exceeding Expectations: Successful Adults with Learning Disabilities

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0890797056/>

By Henry B. Reiff, Rick Ginsberg, Paul Jay Gerber
