

# Learning Problems

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*Is your child having learning problems?*

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Is your child:

- Having trouble in school?
- Demonstrating poor academic performance?
- Struggling to understand what is going on in class?
- Falling behind?
- Working hard but still lost?
- Smart but not achieving academic success?
- Having trouble sleeping the night before a test or a big day at school?
- Hating reading, writing, or math?
- Declaring her favorite subjects are recess and lunch?
- Making homework into a war zone?

## LET'S TALK ABOUT IT

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Some children have a hard time in school. Certain subjects might be particularly difficult, or your child may struggle with schoolwork in general. This can be scary for a family as you try to set your child on a path for academic and career success. Your child may struggle with study skills, or not knowing how to prepare for tests. He may have trouble developing a plan to complete an assignment. She may get confused about due dates. You might find that your child has missing assignments or low grades. It also could be

that your child lacks confidence in his or her own academic abilities and becomes stressed or embarrassed when asked to read or do a math problem. Your child may cry during homework or simply refuse to do it. Your child might struggle in one particular academic subject. Your child may hate reading, for example. Unfortunately, if he or she struggles in reading, all other subjects will be impacted because reading is required for most academic tasks.

## CLINICAL DESCRIPTION

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A myriad of potential problems may be getting in the way of your child's academic success. In this article, we will address only a small number of major reasons, as follows: *cognitive ability, study skills, emotional distress, and learning disabilities*. Links are provided for more information on all of these potential problem areas.

**Cognitive ability:** Sometimes, a child does not learn as well because a part of his or her brain is not functioning as well as it should. For example, children with lower [Verbal Comprehension](#) scores on an IQ test tend to struggle with reading and writing. Children with lower scores on the [Non-Verbal](#) or [Spatial](#) part of an IQ test tend to struggle in math, science, or engineering subjects. Finally, children with lower scores on [Processing Speed](#) or [Working Memory](#) tend to struggle in multiple academic areas and may have learning disabilities.

**Study Skills:** Children who struggle to study will have problems with many academic subjects and tasks. It is often the case that their [Executive Functions](#) [1] are impaired.

They may have trouble with [Planning](#) how to solve problems or to go about an assignment, [Initiating](#) tasks, monitoring their own progress on assignments, or [Metacognition](#) (thinking about one's thinking). The combination of these skills is all in the 'upstairs brain' [2], which is the part of the brain that is responsible for higher order problem solving, thinking, and planning.

The good news is that executive functions develop throughout childhood and into early adulthood; your child's brain is still 'working on it.' More good news here is that higher order thinking skills can be taught [3-6].

**Emotional Distress & Self-Esteem:** learning problems tend to share a cyclical relationship with your child's self-confidence. That is, school success tends to be a yardstick by which kids measure themselves. When they are struggling, their self-esteem takes a hit. Children who do not feel good about themselves, tend to perform lower, and feel even worse about themselves as a result. See 'what to do' section below for ideas to address these issues. If the problem appears to be more related to poor motivation and effort, see [Achievement](#) article for ideas to increase your child's motivation and academic self-efficacy.

**Learning Problems:** Although there are many types of learning disabilities, the primary areas psychologists and related professionals consider are [reading](#), [writing](#), and [math](#).

One potential sign that your child may have a learning disability is inconsistent performance. Your child's teacher may comment that 'he could do this yesterday, and now he already forgot it.' You may notice that your child had his spelling words down pat while studying but then still failed the test.

Another sign of a learning disability is that your child is bright but does not perform well. For example, a child with an extensive vocabulary who has a hard time with reading or writing would raise a red flag. Finally, a child who works very slowly in any subject *might* have a learning disability (other reasons for slow pacing are possible, so this sign is not definite). Learning disabilities almost always require remediation and intervention. If you suspect your child has a learning disability, it is wise to consult with the school and request an evaluation.

## **WHAT TO DO WHEN YOUR CHILD IS STRUGGLING AT SCHOOL**

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Children who struggle with their learning tend to experience emotional symptoms or behavior problems.

*Emotional symptoms:* If you see a sudden drop in your child's general happiness, motivation, or enjoyment of life, it is important to consider depression or significant emotional distress.

*Behavior problems:* If you see your child refusing tasks, having tantrums, or giving up easily, these behaviors are red flags. In these cases, you would be wise to consider an evaluation by a psychologist.

*Evaluating emotional or behavioral problems:* Although the school should be consulted for any learning problems, school psychologists are generally not licensed to diagnose clinical or psychiatric disorders. They can be tremendously helpful in terms of helping your child with emotional symptoms, and can identify learning disabilities through a school evaluation process.\* However, a licensed psychologist, Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) or Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC), would be needed to make diagnostic decisions regarding emotional or behavioral disorders.

*Learning disabilities:* If you suspect your child may have a learning disability, it is important to talk to your child's school. It may be that resources are available for intervention through the school's Response to Intervention program. Your child may require a [504 Plan](#) or [Individualized Education Program \(IEP\)](#) for accommodations or services. The good news is that many people with learning disabilities learn how to live with these challenges and thrive. Although most learning disabilities are lifelong, the intensity of the struggle and challenge will tend to lessen significantly over time with support and intervention.

## SIMILAR SYMPTOMS

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*If your child is struggling with a similar problem, not directly addressed in this section, see the list below for links to information about other related symptom areas.*

- [Achievement](#): problem with low performance on academic skills, poor grades, low test scores
- [Basic reading skills](#): problems in decoding, accuracy, or fluency,
- [Reading comprehension](#): problems understanding written words and stories
- [Writing](#): problems in spelling, grammar, or organization
- [Math](#): problems in math facts, calculation, or word problems
- [Initiate](#): problems in getting started on tasks
- [Metacognition](#): problems with ‘thinking about one’s thinking’
- [Drawing](#): problems with drawing familiar shapes and figures
- [Attention](#): problems shifting or sustaining attention
- [Emotional symptoms](#): problems denoted by a decrease in general happiness or enjoyment in life; and crying (depression) and excessive worries (anxiety)
- [Behavioral symptoms](#): problems denoted by tantrums and refusal of tasks (behavior problems)

## POTENTIAL DISABILITIES

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*Children who have significant problems in this area **may** have any of the following potential disabilities. \*Note, this information does **not** serve as a diagnosis in any way. See the ‘Where to Go for Help’ section for professionals who can diagnose or provide a referral.*

- [Developmental Coordination Disorder](#): challenges with fine motor likely including poor handwriting
- [Specific Learning Disability in reading / Dyslexia \(Educationally Identified Disabilities- can be diagnosed clinically as well\)](#): significant processing difficulty, challenges reading accurately and fluidly or problems with reading comprehension\*
- [Specific Learning Disability in writing / Dysgraphia \(Educationally Identified Disabilities- can be diagnosed clinically as well\)](#): significant processing difficulty as well as challenges with spelling, writing organization, or grammar\*
- [Specific Learning Disability in math / Dyscalculia: \(Educationally Identified Disabilities- can be diagnosed clinically as well\)](#): significant processing difficulty and challenges with number sense, calculation, or problem solving\*
- [Autism](#): learning problems in reading comprehension, organization, or executive functions are common in children with autism
- [ADHD](#): learning problems related to attention, impulsivity, and disinhibition are common in children with ADHD

*\*Note: just being identified or diagnosed with a learning disability does not necessarily qualify a child for services on an Individualized Education Program (IEP). See: [Educationally Identified Disabilities](#) for more information on qualification criteria*

## WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

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- [CLEAR Child Psychology](#): to obtain a *customized profile* of concerns for your child or to *consult 'live'* with a psychologist
- [Occupational Therapist](#): to look at fine motor as needed
- [Psychologist or Neuropsychologist](#): to consider symptoms in context; may be related to visual-spatial problems, attention, or learning
- [Optometrist or Ophthalmologist](#): to check child's vision
- [School Psychologist](#): to assess learning disabilities and/or intelligence for the purpose of identification for special education services. \*Children with disabilities do not necessarily qualify for IEP's. There needs to be evidence that the child cannot receive reasonable benefit from general education alone for the child to qualify. See: [Educationally Identified Disabilities](#) for more information.

*These professionals may recommend the following tests to assess your child's learning:*

- [Beery VMI sequence](#): fine motor and visual-motor integration test (clinical or school evaluation)
- [DAS-2](#): cognitive test (clinical, neuropsychological, psychological, or school evaluation)
- [TOWL](#): writing test (clinical or school evaluation)
- [WIAT-III or WJ-IV](#): achievement tests (clinical or school evaluation)
- [WISC-V](#): intelligence test (clinical, neuropsychological, psychological, or school evaluation)
- [Writing Samples](#): an evaluation of a child's written assignments (clinical or school evaluation)

## LEARN MORE

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[1] Kroncke, Willard, & Huckabee (2016). *Assessment of autism spectrum disorder: Critical issues in clinical forensic and school settings*. Springer, San Francisco.

Springer: <http://www.springer.com/us/book/9783319255026>

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[2] Anderman, Eric M. & Anderman, Lynley Hicks (2009). Classroom motivation.

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Classroom-Motivation-Eric-M-Anderman/dp/0131116975/>

[3] Dawson, Peg & Guare, Richard (2009). *Smart but scattered: The revolutionary “executive skills” approach to helping kids reach their potential.*

Amazon: <http://www.amazon.com/Smart-but-Scattered-Revolutionary-Executive/dp/1593854455/>

[4] Dawson, Peg & Guare, Richard (2010). *Executive skills in children and adolescents: A practical guide to assessment and intervention, second edition.*

Amazon: [https://www.amazon.com/Executive-Skills-Children-Adolescents-Second/dp/1606235710?ie=UTF8&ref =asap\\_bc](https://www.amazon.com/Executive-Skills-Children-Adolescents-Second/dp/1606235710?ie=UTF8&ref =asap_bc)

[5] Reid, Robert, & Leinemann, Torri Ortiz & Hagan, Jessica L. (2006). *Strategy instruction for students with learning disabilities, second edition.*

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Instruction-Disabilities-Special-Needs-Lienemann-Paperback/dp/B010WI4TBA/>

*Learning & motivation books for kids:*

Cook, Julia (2013). *Thanks for the feedback, I think (Best me I can be!)*

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Thanks-Feedback-Think-Best-Can/dp/1934490490/>

Deak, JoAnn & Ackerley, Sarah (2010). *Your fantastic elastic brain stretch it, shape it.*

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Fantastic-Elastic-Brain-Stretch-Shape/dp/0982993803/>

Hamm, Mia (2006). *Winners never quit!*

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Winners-Never-Quit-Mia-Hamm/dp/0060740523/>

Meiners, Cheri, J. (2003). *Listen and learn.*

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Listen-Learn-Cheri-J-Meiners/dp/1575421232/>

McCumbee, S. (2014) *The garden in my mind: Growing through positive choices.*

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Garden-My-Mind-Growing-Positive/dp/1934490547/>

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Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Garden-My-Mind-Activity-Book/dp/1934490555/>

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