Common Learning Disabilities

Why students are struggling

A learning disability is a disorder that affects individuals of normal or above average intelligence and the manner in which they comprehend, retain, and express information. These disabilities are cross-cultural with no tie to racial or ethnic origin. They can be inconsistent, appearing in grade school only to disappear and then reappear during the college years, and they are nearly always extremely frustrating. Because learning disabilities are not always visible to educators, parents or peers, students who have them face the additional challenge of convincing others that they exist and are a real handicap.

Types of Learning Disabilities

Developmental Reading Disorder • Dyslexia

This disorder is quite widespread, affecting 2 to 8 percent of elementary school children. The fact is that reading is actually a complicated process and requires many different skills working together. Consider that in order to read successfully, one must:

- focus attention on the printed marks and control eye movements
- recognize the sounds associated with the letters
- understand words and grammar
- build ideas and images
- compare new ideas to current knowledge
- store ideas in memory

Any one of those tasks can create a problem for someone with a reading disorder. Scientists have discovered that a significant number of people with dyslexia are unable to distinguish or separate the sounds in spoken words – two fundamentals in the quest to read.

Reading disabilities also occur when the reader can’t understand or remember new ideas. This type of reading disorder usually appears in upper grades, so it might be something a college student has only been dealing with for a few years.

Characteristics associated with a developmental reading disorder include:

- slow reading rate or difficulty modifying reading rate based on difficulty of material
- uneven comprehension and retention of material
- difficulty identifying important themes
- incomplete mastery of phonics and vocabulary skills

Developmental Writing Disorder

Writing, like reading, involves several brain functions. The areas of the brain that handle vocabulary, grammar, hand movement and memory all must be capable and functioning. A problem in any of these areas can cause a developmental writing disorder.

A few of the characteristics associated with a writing disorder include:

- difficulty planning and organizing thoughts and topics on paper
- difficulty with sentence structure
- frequent spelling errors
- difficulty with proofreading and editing
- short compositions
- slow writing skills
- poor penmanship
- inability to copy material

Developmental Arithmetic Disorder • Dyscalculia

Dyscalculia is sometimes called “Math Dyslexia,” and is similar in that actually doing arithmetic involves several brain functions working simultaneously. You must recognize symbols and numbers, memorize facts, align numbers and understand abstract concepts. Any of these may be difficult for someone with dyscalculia.

Characteristics associated with a developmental arithmetic disorder include:

- incomplete mastery of basic facts such as multiplication tables
- reverses numbers
- confuses operational symbols (especially + and x)
- copies problems incorrectly from one line to the next
- difficulty recalling the sequence of operational concepts
- difficulty comprehending word problems
- difficulty understanding key concepts and applications needed to assist in problem solving