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Helping your child understand LD

How much should you tell your child about his learning disability? Dr. Betty Osman offers expert guidance on a tricky topic.

By Betty Osman, Ph.D.

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, PhD, 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. 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 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, PhD, 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.