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How learning disabilities affect family dynamics

Raising a child with LD is a family affair. Dr. Betty Osman explains how to manage many of the problems that may emerge.

By Betty Osman, Ph.D.

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."

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.

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!