



Parenting a Child With Learning Disabilities

By now, you realize there's a big change in your life since your child has been identified with learning disabilities (LD). Is it something you could have prevented? Does this mean that all of your dreams for him won't come true? How can you cope with it all?

Feeling Emotions

You probably feel flooded with emotions since the discovery that your child has LD. You may feel guilt over what you think that you did or didn't do. You may experience denial that there's a problem that can't be cured or fear that your child won't be able to hold a job successfully or go to college. You may be worried about what your family and friends will say or angry that this happened. Feelings of self-doubt creep in, and you wonder whether you're doing the right thing or enough to help him. You may feel overwhelmed and don't know where to start. These are normal reactions, part of the grieving process that occurs when you learn your child has LD.

Adjusting to the Demands

How do you juggle all of the demands on you? Accepting that you're now parenting a child with LD is the first step in the journey. You'll find that you need a lot of information and ongoing support.

The first thing you may need to do is gather information from trusted sources — teacher, counselor, doctor, library, or Internet — to understand your child's learning disabilities. You may want to focus on finding additional help for your child with LD outside of school — tutor, further assessment, private school. You'll have to decide when to be skeptical because of promises of a "cure" that's too good to be true.

It may be hard to talk to family and friends. You might feel isolated or rejected because they just don't seem to understand his special needs or what you're going through.

It may be even harder to explain his LD to your child. Point out his strengths and the ways you plan to help him with things that are difficult. Remind him that his intelligence is normal, so that LD isn't confused with mental retardation. And if he doesn't believe you, ask the school psychologist, teacher, or other professional to explain LD to him.

You'll probably find that you're spending more time communicating with school and outside professionals who are working with him. It'll mean keeping records that you didn't have to for your other kids. It could mean going to more parent-teacher conferences, writing more notes to school, or planning for IEP meetings.

You may need to set up behavior plans or a schedule at home to accommodate your child with LD. How will you balance activities and decide what's important for him — doing chores, taking care of pets, participating in sports, studying music, completing homework? Clearly homework is important, but he also needs opportunities to excel at something outside school.

If you can't be home to help after school yourself, you may want to find a family member, neighbor, childcare provider, or tutor to help your child. You may even need to adjust your work hours or change jobs.

If it takes him more time to do his homework, do the other kids or family members find themselves helping around the house more, getting less help with their homework, or seeing less of you? How do you do this and not allow his brothers and sisters to feel neglected?

Maintaining self-esteem can be an issue, not only for the child with LD but also for you, siblings, and family members. You'll need to remember his strengths and talents and remind him of all the reasons why you love him. And you'll need to make sure that you have a support system in place for yourself as you make this journey.

Prioritizing Issues

Each parent has to decide for herself what to do first. For some, it'll be gathering information; for others, sharing information with your child, family, or friends. It may be finding help for your child or someone to support you personally. Whatever you decide, rely on your knowledge and instincts; then make a plan. Chances are you'll find that some of the same issues will resurface with a slightly different twist at various stages in your child's development.

Supporting Your Child

- Praise him for both the small steps and big leaps in the right direction.
- Emphasize achievements, skills, progress, and effort.
- Create an environment at home where you can accept his difficulties and talk openly.
- Seek out areas of strength and talent.
- Make sure he has a life outside school.
- Participate in planning his academic program.
- Talk to his teachers regularly.
- Set realistic goals and expectations — don't make things too easy or too hard.
- Have fun together — go camping, visit a museum, coach his athletic team, go out for ice cream.
- Acknowledge that you make mistakes, too, and that's all a part of the learning process.
- Be a positive role model — every child needs someone to look up to.

Helping at Home

- Reinforce academic skills — Integrate pressure-free learning into everyday experiences. Have him prepare a batch of cookies by reading the recipe, writing the shopping list, estimating costs, following directions, measuring ingredients, checking the baking time. Then have him share his success with family or friends.
- Reinforce critical thinking skills — Ask open-ended questions that focus on his ideas and opinions and have more than one right answer. This gives him practice in examining topics from many points of view without risk of being judged right or wrong.
- Reinforce social skills — Connect with outside groups such as scouts and clubs, sports groups, after-school homework or social groups, religious groups, organized activities, etc. Practicing social skills in activities where there is less stress can help him deal with the pressures of socializing in school.
- Reinforce behavior skills — Model appropriate behavior, practicing alternative ways to deal with frustrations. Teach him to "count to 10" or take deep breaths when he's becoming upset. What he practices at home may help him be more self-aware at school.
- Minimize frustration — Teach him to organize materials, discuss assignments, think about problems, or practice with materials. If he doesn't know an answer, give it to him or guide him in

finding it. If an answer is wrong, tell him in a calm, nonjudgmental way. Remember that if he doesn't make any mistakes, the assignment is probably too easy. No one's perfect; mistakes are part of the learning process and should be expected.

- Help with homework — Keep sessions brief. If he can't get his work done in a reasonable amount of time, talk to the teacher about adjusting assignments or due dates. If the interaction becomes strained or stressful, stop. Talk to his teacher about these frustrations, and see if there are alternative ways to approach the work.

Caring for Yourself

- Practice patience with yourself and with your child.
- Don't be plagued by guilt. If needed, get professional help for yourself because your child can "read" what you're feeling.
- Find a support group, [online community](#), friend or family member who has similar experiences to share.
- Allow yourself some time alone or to do an activity you enjoy — read, take a walk, visit with family or friends, see a movie.
- Find something you can laugh about because humor helps to keep things in perspective.

About the Contributor(s)



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