

SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITIES

What is a Specific Learning Disability?

According to Western Australian Government estimates, at least 20% of students currently enrolled in school in Western Australia are at risk of failing to meet an appropriate level of educational attainment as a result of learning difficulties. For some of these students, the barrier which hampers their learning may be only temporary. Some students may have missed a great deal of school and others may not have received appropriate instruction in reading.

For other students, however, the barrier to effective learning is a component of their developmental make-up. These students, although almost always of average or above average intelligence, have a specific condition which has a significant impact on their learning. These students have a specific learning disability.

Specific learning disabilities are not intellectual impairments. Students with intellectual impairments are generally assessed as having reduced cognitive capacity, which has a global impact on learning and daily functioning. Students with a specific learning disability have significant difficulty in one academic area while coping well, or even excelling, in other areas of academic, sporting or artistic achievement.

In other parts of the world specific learning disabilities are also called Learning Disorders or Academic Skill Disorders. In effect each describes the same thing, although the diagnostic criteria may differ slightly. Under Commonwealth and State Law, a specific learning disability is generally recognised as resulting in the child (or adult) "learning differently". If it is apparent that this difference is interfering with a person's capacity to access the curriculum or demonstrate their skills and knowledge, an individually targeted intervention should be provided. This should include both remediation and accommodation.

Comparing Specific Learning Disabilities with Learning Difficulties

There are many reasons why a child or adult may

struggle to learn. The generic term "Learning Difficulties" refers to the 20 to 25% of students who exhibit problems acquiring academic skills as a consequence of a range of causes. These include: intellectual disability, physical or sensory deficits (e.g. hearing impairment), emotional or behavioural difficulties, and inadequate environmental experiences. Students may also display learning difficulties if they have not been provided with appropriate educational opportunities or have received ineffective instruction in the classroom. Individuals with a primary difficulty in maintaining attention and concentration are also likely to show weaknesses in academic achievement due to their difficulties in attending to the learning environment.

The learning difficulties associated with a Specific Learning Disability cannot be attributed to the causes listed above. A specific learning disability results from an impairment in one or more of the psychological processes related to learning. The difficulties experienced by an individual with a specific learning disability are unexpected in relation to their other skills. These difficulties are likely to be resistant to intervention and will persist into adulthood.

The Different Types of Specific Learning Disabilities

Specific learning disabilities may occur in almost any area of learning. The common theme is unexpected under-achievement in an area of academic skill which is generally unmatched in other areas. While there are clearly different specific learning disabilities, making a distinction between each is not always easy as there are often overlaps.

The nature of all specific learning disabilities is that the problem is severe, persistent, occurs despite appropriate educational opportunities, and is in contrast to other areas of strength in academic achievement or cognitive development. The most common specific learning disability is dyslexia, which is a persistent difficulty in the area of reading and spelling.

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SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITIES cont.

Specific learning disabilities may occur in the following areas of academic skill:

Reading

A specific learning disability in reading is commonly called dyslexia. This specific learning disability is "characterised by difficulties with accurate and /or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities". Individuals with dyslexia experience difficulties with reading accuracy, rate and comprehension. They are also likely to struggle with phonological coding, or the ability to readily and easily associate speech sounds with individual letters and/or groups of letters, which is a central part of the reading process.

Written Expression

Also called dysgraphia, this specific learning disability is focused on the production of written language. Motor dysgraphia relates to persistent handwriting difficulties associated with an impairment in motor co-ordination. Language-based dysgraphia is associated with difficulties in constructing meaningful and effectively structured written expression. These are students who have extreme difficulty getting their thoughts both in order and then down on paper. Many students with dysgraphia also have dyslexia.

Mathematics

Also called dyscalculia this specific learning disability presents as a severe difficulty with number faculty and mathematical ability.

Co-ordination and Language disorders can be generally classed under the umbrella of specific learning disabilities.

Co-ordination

Called dyspraxia, this learning disability is centred on the ability to carry out sequences of co-ordinated motor activity, and the planning and execution of tasks. It is associated with problems of perception, language and thought. Verbal dyspraxia relates to difficulties in programming, sequencing and initiating the movements needed to make speech sounds and treatment is generally managed by a speech therapist. Motor dyspraxia affects the planning and

execution of movements in a co-ordinated manner and difficulties in these skills are generally addressed by an occupational therapist.

Language

Specific Language Impairment can occur in the area of expressive language, receptive language or both, and may be phonological in nature. SLIs are distinct from speech disorders (such as stuttering), and may include difficulties with vocabulary, word meanings or concept formation. Individuals with a primary language impairment should generally be assessed and receive treatment from a speech pathologist.

Prevalence

At least 20% of students currently enrolled in Western Australian schools are at risk of failing to meet an appropriate level of educational attainment as a result of learning difficulties. Approximately 4% of students can be identified as having a specific learning disability in reading (dyslexia). Some of these students will also have other learning disabilities. This equates to approximately one student in every classroom.

Anyone can have a specific learning disability, although evidence suggests that there is a genetic component. For example, if one person has dyslexia, about 40% of his/her first degree relatives are also likely to have a reading disability. However, specific learning disabilities can, and often do, appear almost randomly. Specific learning disabilities are not "caused" by the school that a student attends; although it is certainly the case that early intervention and appropriate support can reduce the long-term impact. One of the defining features of a specific learning disability is the fact that the difficulty continues to exist despite appropriate instruction and intervention. Best-practice teaching and effective accommodations will certainly reduce the functional impact.

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