

An Introduction to Learning Disabilities

The following introduction provides general information regarding the causes, symptoms, and definitions of selected learning disabilities prior to attending the Working with W-2 Participants with Learning Disabilities classroom training. The introduction is brief, but essential to your full participation in the classroom training. If you wish to read further on this topic, links to related articles and resources also are provided.

The definition for learning disabilities used here and in the classroom training is from the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS), as cited by the Job Accommodation Network (JAN) on its website in the article “Accommodation and Compliance Series: Employees with Learning Disabilities.”

“...[L]earning disabilities are disorders that affect the ability to understand or use spoken or written language, do mathematical calculations, coordinate movements, or direct attention. Although learning disabilities occur in very young children, the disorders are usually not recognized until the child reaches school age. Learning disabilities are a lifelong condition; they are not outgrown or cured, though many people develop coping techniques through special education, tutoring, medication, therapy, personal development, or adaptation of learning skills.”¹

Causes

Experts have yet to identify specific causes that lead to learning disabilities. The National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) does note that these disorders may be due to:

- **Heredity:** The disability often runs in the family. Children with learning disabilities are likely to have parents or other relatives with similar difficulties.
- **Problems during pregnancy and birth:** An illness or injury during or before birth may cause a learning disability. Drug and alcohol use during pregnancy, low birth weight, lack of oxygen, and premature or prolonged labor also may lead to the disorder.
- **Incidents after birth:** Serious illness, head injuries, poor nutrition, and exposure to toxins such as lead can contribute to a learning disability.

Learning disabilities are not the result of economic or educational disadvantage or cultural differences.² On the other hand, children who grow up with more resources are

¹“Accommodation and Compliance Series: Employees with Learning Disabilities,” Job Accommodation Network (JAN). <http://askjan.org/media/LD.html>. (from the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke. (2011). NINDS learning disabilities information page:

<http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/learningdisabilities/learningdisabilities.htm>)

²“What Are Learning Disabilities?” by the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) Editorial Team. <http://www.nclد.org/types-learning-disabilities/what-is-ld/what-are-learning-disabilities>

more likely to get effective early intervention. Dr. Sally Shaywitz, author of *Overcoming Dyslexia* says:

A knowledgeable and proactive parent is often the critical factor responsible for transforming an unhappy struggling reader into a happy, proficient one. A parent plays a determining role in ensuring that her child: 1.) is accurately and promptly diagnosed; 2.) is provided reading programs that are scientifically proven to work; and 3.) develops a lasting positive sense of himself.³

Following are details on the most frequently occurring learning disabilities.

Dyslexia

Dyslexia is defined as “disorders that involve difficulty in learning to read or interpret words, letters, and other symbols, but that do not affect general intelligence.”⁴ The word comes from the Greek words *dys* – meaning “bad” and *lex* – referring to words. Broadly interpreted, it means a difficulty with the printed word.

When objects change their orientation, their meaning does not change. However, when *letters* change their orientation, their meaning *does* change. Slight differences, such as the length or direction of a line, or the amount of closure of a circle, can change a letter’s meaning entirely. For example, consider the letters in the columns below, from the orientation shift of the “p” to “q” and the “M” flipping to “W.” The confusion of lowercase “b” and “d” is the most common of these.

p	q
d	b
g	a
o	c
n	u
M	W

Dyslexics tend to be very concrete thinkers. Many of them work in trades like carpentry and mechanics where their ability to work with physical objects is a strength. Some famous artists and authors are dyslexic, John Irving and John Grisham, for example. Whoopi Goldberg, Thomas Edison, Tom Cruise and many other creative minds are dyslexic.

Individuals with **reading problems**, another characteristic of dyslexia, have difficulty distinguishing the different letters or letter combinations within words, and then have difficulty identifying **appropriate sounds that those letter combinations represent**.

³ “A Conversation with Sally Shaywitz, M.D., Author of “Overcoming Dyslexia.” Retrieved from <http://www.greatschools.org/special-education/LD-ADHD/836-a-conversation-with-sally-shaywitz-m-d-author-of-overcoming-dyslexia.gs>

⁴ The New Oxford American Dictionary, 1st ed. 2001. NY: Oxford University Press.

Educators call the process of sounding out a word and making sense of it “decoding.” Because of the great amount of energy dyslexics expend in decoding, they find it difficult to retain the word and fit it into the context of the larger story. A person may read a word once, but next time s/he is presented with the same word, it must be decoded again.

Individuals with **encoding problems** have difficulty distinguishing the different sounds within words, and then have difficulty finding appropriate letters or letter combinations to represent those sounds. Writing each word becomes an exercise in “cracking the code.”

Reading comprehension is the ability to discern intended meaning from combinations of words, not just individual words as they stand alone. Individuals with **reading comprehension problems** have difficulty understanding what they have read, even if they have no problems decoding.

Associative and Cognitive Tasks

Associative Tasks: Tasks that require little thought. More than one associative task can be performed at the same time. For example, driving a car is, for most experienced drivers, an associative task. People can drive while talking, eating, drinking and playing games like “Highway Bingo.”

Cognitive Tasks: Tasks that require concentration. Cognitive tasks must be performed alone. Examples of this kind of task include speaking a foreign language learned in school or trying a new dance step with a partner. Even a slight distraction or unexpected difficulty makes these tasks impossible. People who have tried using a foreign language on the phone or in a crowded train station can relate to this.

A task that might be associative to a person without a learning disability could be cognitive to a person with a learning disability. For example, someone without a learning disability might be able to work on his/her laptop in a Wi-Fi cafe and perceive the cues of the people around – someone waiting for a table to open so that s/he can sit with his/her laptop and coffee, someone who sees that there is an open table behind the next pillar, etc. However, an individual who handles incoming and outgoing information more cognitively will be able to concentrate only on what is on his/her laptop. This individual must become totally wrapped up in the laptop and will miss other things happening in the immediate area.

Dysnomia

Dysnomia is the **difficulty in remembering names or recalling appropriate words to use in a given context.**

Individuals with dysnomia struggle to name things. They know what they want to say, but cannot come up with the names of words or actions. They may talk haltingly, as the effort to speak is cognitive; that is, it takes a great deal of conscious effort, not associative, as it is for most people.

Sequencing Problems

Individuals with this disability have **difficulty with the contents of written information**. Copying words or numbers, for example, is extremely arduous because they must look back at the original and find the place for each letter or digit.

Dysgraphia

Individuals with dysgraphia have **issues with fine motor control**, making it difficult to form letters, close circles, join lines, and make loops. Writing is a painstaking task, and individuals with dysgraphia have difficulty producing legible handwriting.

Directionality

Directionality is the ability to know right from left, up from down, forward from backward, and direction and orientation.

Individuals with directionality impairment will have **difficulty finding their way around**, will have problems with left-right, and may get lost in hallways, or in finding buildings, streets, or entire cities. These individuals may find it difficult to follow the orientation or directionality of maps, making maps difficult to use. They may not be able to understand spoken directions, such as “Turn left here,” preferring instead for someone to point in the direction of the turn.

Dyscalculia

Dyscalculia is a **difficulty in understanding math concepts or using mathematical symbols or functions**.

Individuals with dyscalculia will have difficulty in calculating even simple mathematical problems, such as balancing a checkbook, figuring time spent on a task, making change, and estimating results.

Memory Problems

Short-term memory lasts 6-8 seconds and fades quickly. Information is retained only long enough to write it down or use it immediately.

Long-term memory information is stored in the brain for later retrieval. Information is linked to other information in a logical “cataloging” system for easy retrieval.

Individuals with memory problems usually have problems in two areas:

1. They do not use strategies to move short-term items into the long-term storage system.
2. They do not use an effective linking system for organized storage of information, making retrieval of specific information nearly impossible.

Social Naiveté

Social naiveté means being **highly vulnerable to the suggestions of others**. It manifests in an inability to distinguish between genuine friendship and other types of relationships, such as those who use a person for their own ends or for entertainment.

Individuals who are socially naive are easily led into situations that may not be good for them. This may be caused by missing social cues, or it may be the result of a low self-concept and a lifetime of social isolation – this person may have a desire to fit in so much that s/he will be eager to do anything suggested.

Inappropriate Independence

Inappropriate independence is demonstrated by **a reluctance to ask for assistance; difficulty knowing when to ask questions**.

Individuals with inappropriate independence are reluctant to ask for assistance. This may be attributed to an attempt to avoid looking foolish. More likely, research suggests that these individuals are not aware that they need to ask questions. They may not realize that more information is needed in order to complete a task or to respond to a request appropriately.

These individuals will leave your office believing they understand everything they need. But, when they begin to perform the agreed-upon task, they find that their level of information is incomplete. Even then, they may not request assistance.

As noted earlier, this is a brief introduction to support your participation in the Working with W-2 Participants with Learning Disabilities classroom training. If you wish to continue your reading on learning disabilities, please go to:
<http://askjan.org/media/LD.html>.

The purpose of the classroom training is to provide you with practical strategies and techniques for working effectively in the W-2 program with applicants/participants living with learning disabilities, assisting them as they move toward economic stability.

Upon completion of the classroom training, you will be able to:

- Recognize how learning disabilities may affect job search and retention;
- Cite laws and W-2 program policies that relate to providing accommodations and services for individuals with learning disabilities;
- Use informal and formal assessment results to determine reasonable accommodations based on the W-2 participant's learning disability needs, allowing him/her to participate in the W-2 program and in the local labor market;
- Identify resources for working with W-2 participants with learning disabilities; and
- Review, assess, and implement strategies for appropriate engagement of W-2 participants with learning disabilities for their entry/reentry into the workforce

The next page contains a list of state and national learning disability-related organizations, with web addresses and contact information that may be useful to you and W-2 applicants/participants.

Organizations

CHADD - Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder

4601 Presidents Drive, Suite 300

Lanham, MD 20706

ruth_hughes@chadd.org

<http://www.chadd.org>

Tel: 301-306-7070, 800-233-4050

Fax: 301-306-7090

International Dyslexia Association

40 York Road, 4th Floor

Baltimore, MD 21204

info@interdys.org

<http://www.interdys.org>

Tel: 410-296-0232, 800-ABCD123

Fax: 410-321-5069

Learning Disabilities Association of America

4156 Library Road, Suite 1

Pittsburgh, PA 15234-1349

info@ldaamerica.org

<http://www.ldaamerica.org>

Tel: 412-341-1515

Fax: 412-344-0224

Learning Disabilities Association of Wisconsin

info@LDAwisconsin.com

<http://www.ldawisconsin.com/index.htm>

National Center for Learning Disabilities

381 Park Avenue South, Suite 1401

New York, NY 10016

nclld@nclld.org

<http://www.ld.org>

Tel: 212-545-7510, 888-575-7373

Fax: 212-545-9665

National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)

National Institutes of Health, DHHS

6001 Executive Blvd. Rm. 8184, MSC 9663

Bethesda, MD 20892-9663

nimhinfo@nih.gov

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov>

Tel: 301-443-4513, 866-415-8051, 301-443-8431 (TTY)

Fax: 301-443-4279

Wisconsin Institute for Learning Disabilities/Dyslexia Inc. (WILDD)

636 Grand Canyon Drive

Madison, WI 53719

madison@wildd.org

<https://www.wildd.org/>

Tel: 608-824-8980

Fax 608-831-3840

Wisconsin Literacy, Inc.

211 S. Paterson St., Suite 260

Madison, WI 53703

info@WisconsinLiteracy.org

<http://www.wisconsinliteracy.org/>

Phone: 608-257-1655

Fax: 608-661-0208