

Helping Children with Learning Disabilities and Differences Adjust to School

Rona Renner, RN and Marisol Muñoz-Kiehne, PhD

Now that children are back at school, notice if they're getting frustrated as they put their attention on learning new skills. There are many children who suffer from hidden learning disabilities. We call it hidden because there isn't a physical sign of a disability, and yet there are barriers to learning that children experience. Your child may be excellent in math but can't spell well. Another child may have trouble listening to what the teacher is saying, but can work well when reading an assignment. There are many different types of learning disabilities, and if you're concerned, we encourage you to get help. You can make a big difference in helping your child be successful in school and in life.

Suggestions for helping children with learning challenges:

- Know a child's strengths, and build on them. If a child is a good artist, but has trouble writing, have her draw a picture before getting started on the writing assignment.
- Don't make children feel bad if they struggle with reading or spelling. Keep in mind that they may not be able to do work that others can do, but it's not an indication of their intelligence. Many people with learning disabilities are very smart. When a person has a learning disability there is a discrepancy between how a person is performing and what they're capable of doing.
- Advocate for children. Set up times to discuss your child's work and needs. Ask for a Student Study Team meeting or an assessment for learning disabilities. Put all of your requests in writing and keep a copy. An IEP (Individual Education Plan) would provide your child with accommodations that could aid in learning. If you don't have one, ask the school what steps to take.
- Seek help from qualified professionals, tutors, and teachers. Ask your pediatrician for resources if you're having trouble getting your child assessed at school.
- Talk to other parents of children with special needs. They can give you support and tips to avoid academic and emotional distress. When children feel frustrated, they're more likely to exhibit behavioral or mood problems.
- Avoid homework battles. Ask the teachers to modify homework assignments as needed. Help children organize and prioritize their work.
- Use "to-do" lists and post-it notes to help children remember what is needed and expected.
- Give frequent positive feedback. Children with learning differences often think they're not smart, and need to hear that they are. Praise kindness and other traits you value.
- Enjoy your children, and set aside family time that focuses on fun.

Resources:

- Disability Rights and Education Fund, www.dredef.org
- The International Dyslexia Association, www.interdys.org
- Great Schools, www.greatschools.org

