



## Specific Learning Disabilities

If your child is struggling in school, you may wonder whether or not he has a “learning disability.” Learning disabilities cover a wide range of learning difficulties and children with learning disabilities make up the majority of children who receive special education services. The first thing you should do if your child is having difficulty in school is discuss your concerns with your child’s teacher. Be sure to prepare for this discussion, bringing with you samples of his work and examples of how you see him struggling (e.g. time spent on homework, level of assistance needed, his frustrations, etc.) The teacher may refer your child to a Student Study Team or other general education group of school staff who can discuss possible changes or accommodations your child may need in the classroom.

If your child continues to struggle even with adjustments that have been made by the teacher, you may want to have your child assessed to determine if, among other difficulties, your child has a learning disability. The information in this packet will provide you with introductory information on this very broad topic including an overview of learning disabilities, evaluations to determine if a child has a learning disability, eligibility for special education including the definition of special education “specific learning disability” eligibility, the kinds of evaluations used, information on social and emotional issues that come into play as well as possible interventions. Additionally you will find a variety of print and internet resources to help you learn about this topic and how you can help your child.

### **Other Information Packets Available:**

Individual Education Plans (IEP) Overview  
ADHD/ADD  
Assessments  
Autism  
Behavior  
Bullying  
School Discipline  
504 Plans  
Advocacy and Communication  
Emotional Difficulties  
A Student’s Guide to the IEP

Our libraries in Novato and Fairfield offer many articles, books, DVD’s/videos, magazines and other materials that relate to this topic. Please call our HELP Line (1-800-578-2592) for more information.

*Matrix Parent Network and Resource Center*  
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[www.matrixparents.org](http://www.matrixparents.org)

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## Learning Disability Resources and Sources

*Educational Care, The Myth of Laziness, A Mind at a Time, Developing Minds* (videos) - Levine  
*Finding Help When Your Child is Struggling in School* - Greene  
 "A Guide to Learning Disabilities (LD) Basics" - [www.greatschools.net](http://www.greatschools.net)  
 "Just the Facts: Dylexia Basics", "Just the Facts: Dysgraphia"- [www.interdys.org](http://www.interdys.org)  
*Learning Disabilities: From Identification to Intervention* - Fletcher  
*Learning Outside the Lines* - Mooney  
*Life Success for Children with Learning Disabilities* - Frostig Center [www.LDsuccess.org](http://www.LDsuccess.org)  
*Overcoming Dyslexia* - Shaywitz  
*Nolo's IEP Guide: Learning Disabilities* - Siegel  
*Parenting the Struggling Reader* - Moats  
*Parent's Guide to Learning Disabilities* - McCarney  
 "Self-Esteem & Resilience"& "A Parent's Guide to Social Relationships" - [www.greatschools.net](http://www.greatschools.net)  
*The Source for Dyslexia and Dysgraphia* - Richards  
*The Source for Processing Disorders* – R. Richard  
*The Source for Visual Spatial Disorders* – B. Neff  
*Special Education Rights and Responsibilities* - CASE and PAI  
*Understanding Learning Disabilities* - Learning Disability Council

### WEBSITES

### Learning Disabilities (includes Non-Verbal Learning Disabilities)

Great Schools	<a href="http://www.greatschools.net">www.greatschools.net</a>
International Dyslexia Association	<a href="http://www.interdys.org">www.interdys.org</a>
Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDA)	<a href="http://www.ldanatl.org/">www.ldanatl.org/</a>
Learning Disabilities OnLine	<a href="http://www.ldonline.org">www.ldonline.org</a>
National Center for Learning Disabilities	<a href="http://www.ld.org">www.ld.org</a>
NLD on the Web	<a href="http://www.nldontheweb.org">www.nldontheweb.org</a>
NLDLine	<a href="http://www.nldline.com">www.nldline.com</a>
Nonverbal Learning Disorders Association	<a href="http://www.nlda.org">www.nlda.org</a>
Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic	<a href="http://www.rfbd.org">www.rfbd.org</a>

### WEBSITES

### Education and Special Education & Advocacy

CA Dept. of Education: Special Education	<a href="http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/">www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/</a>
California Association of Resource Specialists	<a href="http://www.carsplus.org">www.carsplus.org</a>
Federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act	<a href="http://idea.ed.gov/">http://idea.ed.gov/</a>
National Institute of Child Health and Human Development	<a href="http://www.nichd.nih.gov">www.nichd.nih.gov</a>
National Association of School Psychologists	<a href="http://www.nasponline.org">www.nasponline.org</a>
National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities	<a href="http://www.nichcy.org">www.nichcy.org</a>
Parent Advocacy Coalition for Educational Rights (PACER)	<a href="http://www.pacer.org">www.pacer.org</a>
Protection and Advocacy (PAI)	<a href="http://www.pai-ca.org">www.pai-ca.org</a>
U.S Dept. of Education No Child Left Behind	<a href="http://www.nochildleftbehind.org">www.nochildleftbehind.org</a>
U.S. Dept. of Education Office for Civil Rights	<a href="http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/index.html">www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/index.html</a>
What Works Clearinghouse – U.S. Dept. of Education	<a href="http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/">http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/</a>
Wrights Law	<a href="http://www.wrightslaw.com">www.wrightslaw.com</a>



## Learning Disabilities – An Overview

There is a wealth of information available on learning disabilities. Learning disabilities may appear in different forms and you may hear different labels used: some are narrow descriptions of a problem area and some describe a broader group of symptoms. Sometimes learning disabilities occur in conjunction with something else such as attention difficulties (ADHD). Sometimes the preference is to avoid labels. You may hear terms such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalcula, auditory or visual processing disorder, or non-verbal learning disability. Please refer to our glossary of terms for definitions. If you are concerned there are some steps you may take:

### **First Step: Identification**

Parents often start to notice issues long before seeking help. Seek help early! Several websites such as [www.ldanatl.org/](http://www.ldanatl.org/) or [www.ldonline.org](http://www.ldonline.org) have checklists to help you better understand warning signs. Once you suspect your child may have trouble learning, request a thorough psycho-educational evaluation. This can be done either by your local school district or through professionals in private practice. Our Matrix Assessment packet can provide you with more information.

### **Second Step: Intervention**

Students with learning disabilities need support, patience and understanding. Professionals who are trained in research-proven methods are a key part of a sound intervention program. If your child is eligible for special education, a well written Individual Education Program (IEP) will provide services, accommodations and more. If your child is not eligible, a close working relationship with the general education teacher is helpful.

### **Third Step: Monitoring Progress**

Whether your child is eligible for special education services or not, keep close tabs on progress. Some children who are not eligible for services when first tested may become eligible later as academic demands increase. Monitoring progress may mean being an advocate for your child for more services or a change in type of services or schools.

### **All Throughout: Support, Encourage and Build on Strengths**

Each of us has a unique learning profile with strengths and weaknesses. As you better understand your child's learning profile, reinforce this message. Research from the Frostig Institute in Los Angeles found that success over a lifetime is based on self-awareness, proactivity, perseverance, goal-setting, the presence and use of effective support systems and emotional coping strategies. The booklet Life Success offers wisdom to consider.

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## What are the Signs of a Learning Disability?

There is no *one* sign that shows a person has a learning disability. Experts look for a noticeable difference between how well a child does in school and how well he or she *could* do, given his or her intelligence or ability. There are also certain clues that may mean a child has a learning disability. We've listed a few below. Most relate to elementary school tasks, because learning disabilities tend to be identified in elementary school. A child probably won't show all of these signs, or even most of them. However, if a child shows a number of these problems, then parents and the teacher should consider the possibility that the child has a learning disability.

When a child has a learning disability, he or she:

- may have trouble learning the alphabet, rhyming words, or connecting letters to their sounds;
- may make many mistakes when reading aloud, and repeat and pause often;
- may not understand what he or she reads;
- may have real trouble with spelling;
- may have very messy handwriting or hold a pencil awkwardly;
- may struggle to express ideas in writing;
- may learn language late and have a limited vocabulary;
- may have trouble remembering the sounds that letters make or hearing slight differences between words;
- may have trouble understanding jokes, comic strips, and sarcasm;
- may have trouble following directions;
- may mispronounce words or use a wrong word that sounds similar;
- may have trouble organizing what he or she wants to say or not be able to think of the word he or she needs for writing or conversation;
- may not follow the social rules of conversation, such as taking turns, and may stand too close to the listener;
- may confuse math symbols and misread numbers;
- may not be able to retell a story in order (what happened first, second, third); or
- may not know where to begin a task or how to go on from there.

If a child has unexpected problems learning to read, write, listen, speak, or do math, then teachers and parents may want to investigate more. The same is true if the child is struggling to do any one of these skills. The child may need to be evaluated to see if he or she has a learning disability.

*This information is an excerpt from the NICHCY Fact Sheet # 7 Learning Disabilities [www.nichcy.org](http://www.nichcy.org)*

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## Learning Disability Evaluations

Methods of evaluating learning disabilities are changing as new research has emerged. Researchers have found that some tests are considered “predictors” of reading problems. In 2004, changes were made to the part of the special education law IDEA that addresses identifying students with learning disabilities. In the past, schools evaluators assessed to identify a discrepancy (difference) between ability (a test of intelligence) and actual performance (tests of academic areas). This method may still be used, but schools may now use the “response to instruction” model. This means an evaluation to determine if a child has or has not responded to research proven teaching methods could determine eligibility for services (Please see **Special Education Eligibility for Specific Learning Disability** and **Parent Page: What is Responsiveness to Intervention**). Many schools have incorporated RTI instructional models into their curriculum while continuing to determine special education eligibility under the category of Specific Learning Disability using the discrepancy model. Private evaluators also evaluate to identify a learning disability regardless of whether the disability rises to the level of eligibility for special education services. As there are MANY tests available, ask for explanations. Below we provide lists of possible assessments that may be used. Other assessment tools may be used as well. Again, ask for an explanation of why particular assessments (tests) are being used.

Discrepancy testing for special education eligibility under specific learning disability would include:

- An **I.Q. test** such as the WISC IV. If it is known that a child has a significant language disability, then a non-verbal I.Q. test may be given such as the C-Toni.
- **Processing testing** that would reveal the reason behind the reading difficulties. Processing areas as defined by special education law: auditory, visual, attention, sensori-motor skills, cognitive abilities such as conceptualization, association, and expression
- Testing in **academic areas** suspected as being impacted by the disability

**Expanded testing** might include a more in-depth look at memory, attention, executive functioning.

### **Dyslexia or Reading Difficulties**

Basic reading skills (decoding and word attack) and reading comprehension are tested to determine eligibility under the category of Specific Learning Disability. There are different ways to test reading comprehension. Commonly used tests are: the Woodcock Johnson III (WJIII), Kaufman, WIAT, Gray Oral Reading.

Other areas that can be tested that are considered highly predictive of reading problems:

- Measures of Rapid Naming (how quickly a child names colors, numbers or other items) Tests: CTOPP, Woodcock Johnson Cognitive Abilities (WJIII)
- Phonemic Awareness (how a child hears very small speech sounds). Tests: CTOPP, WJIII, LAC, TOPA

Many professionals believe other areas important to also evaluate are:

- reading fluency
- speech and language
- attention
- memory

### **Written Expression Difficulties**

Several areas should be evaluated including grammar, punctuation, organization and complexity of ideas. Handwriting skills should be evaluated for some students. Tests that are frequently used include:

- Subtests of the Woodcock Johnson III, Kaufman, Wechsler Individual Achievement Test (WIAT), Peabody Individual Achievement Test (PIAT)
- Test of Written Language (TOWL)
- Mykelbust.
- Review of “real life” writing samples is important

### **Math Difficulties**

Evaluating this area includes the student’s understanding of basic math facts and operations and understanding of math concepts, math reasoning and problem solving.

Possible tests that may be used:

- Subtests of the Woodcock Johnson III, Kaufman, Wechsler Individual Achievement Test (WIAT), Peabody Individual Achievement Test (PIAT)
- KeyMath 3

### **Oral Expression and Listening Comprehension**

These skills are critical to success in the classroom. Deficits in these areas are included in the Specific Learning Disability category and can result in eligibility for services. Possible tests that may be used:

- Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals (CELF)
- Subtests of the Woodcock Johnson III
- Test of Language Competence
- Oral and Written Language Scales (OWLS)
- Test of Auditory Comprehension
- Test of Language Competence

There are also specific tests that can be used with preschool and kindergarten children to evaluate academic areas such as the Basic School Skills Inventory, CELF Preschool Edition, Kaufman Survey of Early Academic and Language Skills.

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## Special Education Eligibility Specific Learning Disability (SLD)

Changes were made to the special education law (IDEA) in 2004 regarding evaluating to determine eligibility for special education under the category “Specific Learning Disability.” School districts may decide to EITHER use a method that determines the existence of a “severe” discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability OR a process that determines if the child responds to scientific, research-based intervention. Under either approach, the IEP TEAM makes the eligibility decision. Parents are members of the team.

### Discrepancy Method/Model

Under the discrepancy method/model, no single score, test or procedure may be used as the basis for the team’s decision. THREE conditions must exist to qualify for eligibility:

**1. A discrepancy between ability (a measure of intelligence such as an I.Q. test) and a measure of achievement in one or more of these academic areas:**

- Oral expression
- Listening comprehension
- Written expression
- Basic reading skills (word attack and decoding)
- Reading comprehension
- Mathematics calculation
- Mathematics reasoning

The discrepancy can’t be caused primarily by: environmental, cultural or economic disadvantage; limited school experience or poor school attendance; vision, hearing or motor abilities; mental retardation; emotional disturbance; unfamiliarity with the English language; lack of instruction in reading and math.

**2. A disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes:**

- attention
- visual processing
- auditory processing
- sensory-motor skills
- cognitive abilities including association, conceptualization and expression

**3. There must be a NEED for special education in order for the child to benefit from the general education program.** The team must agree that the discrepancy can’t be corrected through other regular or categorical programs.

If the standardized tests are considered INVALID for a specific student, the team can determine a discrepancy exists by other means (work samples, observation etc.).

### Response to Intervention (RTI) Method/Model

This model involves monitoring the student’s response to increasingly intensive levels of general education intervention to determine if special education is needed. Ask your district if this model is in use. See **“Parent Page: What is Responsiveness to Intervention.”**

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# Parent Page

## What is Responsiveness to Intervention?

Winter 2007

NRCLD developed this brief to help you understand responsiveness to intervention, an education model that promotes early identification of students who may be at risk for learning difficulties.

In many schools today, when a student can't keep up in class, that student's only option for help is to qualify for special education services. However, if a student struggles at a school that uses the responsiveness to intervention (RTI) model, the school staff's first thought is: Maybe this child isn't getting the instruction that he or she needs to succeed. In other words, the student isn't being "responsive" to the instruction. This doesn't mean that the student isn't trying, but most generally he or she isn't understanding what is being taught by the teacher.

These schools don't wait for students to fail for an extended period. They want to act immediately to get the student the help needed. They regularly screen all students to make sure classroom instruction is on target for the students. Each child is compared to others of the same age and in the same grade and same class.

School-wide screenings and progress monitoring focus on all students' achievements in class. For those students who score lowest on in-class subjects and don't seem to be mastering classroom lessons, the school uses a step-by-step teaching process using scientifically proven teaching techniques and fre-

*Progress monitoring* is a scientifically based practice of assessing students' performance on a regular basis. Progress monitoring helps school teams make decisions about instruction. An NRCLD brief related to this topic is "*What is Progress Monitoring?*"

quent brief assessments to monitor progress—that is, to determine whether the teaching techniques are helping. Results from progress monitoring, usually given at least once a week, show what planning and methods to use for academic success. This process, when done according to effective teaching practices helps to determine whether a student's low achievement is due to instructional or behavioral factors or whether the child has a possible learning disability.

*Responsiveness to intervention (RTI)* is addressed through federal law and refers to a tiered approach to instruction. Students who do not make adequate academic progress and who are at risk for reading and other learning disabilities receive increasingly intensive instructional services. See the graphic on page 2.

Think of responsiveness to intervention as a series of steps. The first step is instruction in the general classroom. Screening tests given in the classroom reveal students at risk for reading and other learning difficulties. For example, testing may show that a student who has difficulty reading needs additional instruction in phonics. In the second step, the classroom teacher might handle the instruction. In other cases, someone who has expertise in reading and phonics might instruct the student and other students who have the same difficulty.

Students who fail to respond to this instruction may then be considered for more specialized instruction in step three, where instruction

1

**Instruction in the General Classroom**  
*Screening tests given to reveal at-risk students*

2

**Classroom teacher provides instruction or expert works with students in small groups**

3

**Instruction with greater frequency or duration**  
*If difficulty persists, specialists may be brought in for a comprehensive evaluation*

may occur with greater frequency or duration. If the achievement difficulties persist, a team of educators from different fields (for example, reading or counseling) completes a comprehensive evaluation to determine eligibility for special education and related services. That's because responsiveness to intervention alone is not sufficient to identify a learning disability. All in all, the goal is to provide the type of instruction and educational assistance the student needs to be successful in the general education classroom.

In the responsiveness to intervention model, one of the benefits for parents is that they get to see how their child is doing, compared to peers, and how the child's class measures up to other classes of the same grade. They can get these results on a regular basis from their school. If class scores are down, for instance, questions will be raised about the quality of teaching in that class; thus, classroom teachers are more accountable for their instruction.

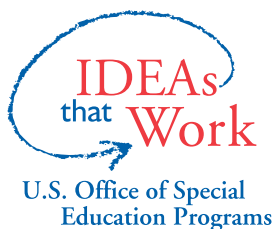
Responsiveness to intervention, with its increased instructional precision, is now used more

to prevent academic failure than to specifically determine which students have learning disabilities. Also, it has been used mostly for reading in elementary schools. Almost no research results yet exist on how it works in middle schools or high schools; practical application of it in math instruction, too, needs to be further documented.

**A**lthough unanswered questions need further research, RTI thus far has compelling benefits. When RTI is implemented with rigor and fidelity, all students receive high-quality instruction in their general education setting. All students are screened for academics and behavior and have their progress monitored to pinpoint specific difficulties.

A continuing advantage for all students is the opportunity to be identified as "at risk" for learning difficulties early in their education instead of having to fail—sometimes for years—before getting additional services. And, all students have the opportunity to get assistance at the level needed, reducing the number of students referred for special education services.

For a long time, special education has been the instructional solution for struggling learners even when they didn't have learning disabilities. Because an abundance of research has shown that well-designed instructional programs and strategies significantly improve learning when carefully monitored, the responsiveness to intervention approach may be a method to improve learning in general education and reduce referrals to special education.



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*National Research Center on Learning Disabilities (2007). What is responsiveness to intervention? [Brochure]. Lawrence, KS: Author.*



## Learning Disabilities: Interventions and Remediation

### Research Proven Methods

The Federal *No Child Left Behind* law places an emphasis on educational methods that are proven to be effective through rigorous scientific research. With this law it makes it easier to ask schools about the methods they are using, and to insist on methods proven to work. Children with learning disabilities have no time to lose with ineffective methods. See our page on “Resources” for web-sites and books that will guide you.

Much has been written about reading, as this skill is critical for success in other subjects. Current research indicates that reading programs need to be phonics based and taught in a systematic and sequential manner. Decoding, fluency and reading comprehension skills need to be taught.

### State Standards

Children with learning disabilities need to be taught starting at their instructional level and moved towards state grade level standards. Trying to teach a child at a level way beyond their current skills builds frustration. If your child has an IEP, the annual goals should move your child from their current PRESENT LEVEL OF PERFORMANCE (which should be specifically stated in the IEP) to a level that shows the discrepancy in skill and ability is being remediated. This often means a child needs to make MORE than ONE YEAR of progress to close the gap. Insist on goals that support specific measurable progress. Moving from the 5% in decoding to 20% is progress to close a gap. Remember though, your child’s progress will be individual.

### Homework Help vs. Remediation

Unless you agree in your child’s IEP that special education be used for homework help, the services should focus on remediating skill deficits. A child with memory weaknesses needs instruction in memory strategies. A child who reads slowly due to poor decoding and reading fluency needs work on these skills which will help later with reading social studies chapters. Learning how to use templates to “web” or outline prior to writing is a tool for a lifetime. Accommodations or modifications should be written in the IEP to make learning in the general education curriculum manageable. Tips for managing homework and study skills can be found on many websites. Some students need an extended school year as part of their IEP to prevent loss of skills over the summer and maintain progress.

### Outside Tutors & After School Support

Having time after school to enjoy and develop areas of interest or to simply relax and watch the clouds is important to balance with working on problem areas. If you feel extra instruction is needed, find out what experience the individual has with learning disabilities as effective remediation is different from general education instruction. Educational therapists are trained in special methods. Coordinating after school efforts with what is going on during the school day is important.

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## Learning Disabilities and Emotional, Social, Behavioral Issues

When students have learning difficulties, sometimes secondary issues emerge. Students can get anxious about school work or become depressed. Behaviors can develop that are coping strategies to deal with frustration. While these behaviors are not seen by others as effective, they may indeed serve an important function to the student:

- work avoidance: avoids embarrassment – it is better to not do work than to do it and get a poor grade – it is better to be seen as forgetful than stupid
- denial of problems: if I ignore the problem I feel better now
- acting out in class: if I am silly in class my peers may value me. If I get kicked out of class I won't have to read aloud. It is better to be seen as bad than stupid
- drugs and alcohol: these help me feel better and hanging out with kids involved with similar activities is at least a group that wants me

### Understand

Brains that are wired differently for academic learning also are the same brains that are used to learn about and perform in social situations and at home. Students who are poor spellers often have messy rooms at home due to weaknesses in visual memory (I don't have a picture in my head of what the word or a clean room looks like). Students with memory problems may forget what has been said in social situations, leaving them at a loss. Teasing, bullying and being bullied, humiliation and frustration can develop.

### Seek Help and Take Action

Pay attention to signs that your child may need extra support both at home and at school. Seek out information about these issues and share your concerns with the school. If issues are significant and your child has an IEP, some students may qualify for mental health services or a behavior support plan ([ask for our packets on Behavior, School Discipline and Emotional Difficulties](#)). Goals can be written to focus work in these areas. Sometimes having someone at school who understands the feelings and needs of your child and can support helps. Other times a child may benefit from professional counseling.

### Support Yourself

Parenting a child who struggles is a challenge. Parents can doubt their parenting skills. Partners can blame each other for the issues. Emotions over homework can make life from 4 P.M. until bedtime very stressful. Reach out and find other parents who have been in this situation. Find humor. Take a walk and talk things over with others.

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