

Parenting Children with Learning Disabilities

Tips for Helping Your Child

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If your child has been diagnosed with a learning disability, you may immediately begin thinking about school — homework, tests, projects — and wondering how your kid will get through. How can you make sure your child has the best chance to reach his or her full potential? If you slow down for a moment, you may realize that while academic success is important, what you really want for your child is a happy and fulfilling life. Your influence on your child outweighs that of any teacher, tutor, therapist or counselor. If your child has a learning disability, your love, encouragement, and support can make all the difference, helping him or her emerge with a strong sense of self-confidence and the determination to succeed.

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Look at the big picture of life with a learning disability

In searching for ways to help children with learning disabilities, remember that you are looking for ways to help them help themselves. A child with a learning disability grows up to be an adult with a learning disability. Your job as a parent is not to “cure” the learning disability, but to give your child the social and emotional tools he or she needs to work through challenges. In the long run, facing and overcoming a challenge such as a learning disability can help your child grow stronger and more resilient.

To ensure the best chance of success for your child over the long term, focus on helping your child develop important life skills and pay attention to his or her physical and emotional well-being. Last, but not least, make sure you take care of yourself, too.

Communicate with family and friends about your child’s learning disability

Some parents keep their child’s learning disability a secret, which can, even with the best intentions, look like shame or guilt. Without knowing, extended family and friends may not understand the disability or think that your child’s behavior is stemming from laziness or hyperactivity. Once they are aware of what’s going on, they can support your child’s progress.

Within the family, siblings may feel that their brother or sister with a learning disability is getting more attention, less discipline and preferential treatment. Even if your other children understand that the learning disability creates special challenges, they can easily feel jealous or neglected. Parents can help curb these feelings by reassuring all of their children that they are loved, providing homework help, and by including family members in any special routines for the child with a learning disability.

Helping a learning disabled child tip 1: Emphasize healthy lifestyle habits

It may seem like common sense that learning involves the body as well as the brain, but your child’s eating, sleep, and exercise habits may be more important than you think. If children with learning disabilities have healthy habits, they will be better able to focus, concentrate, and work hard.

- **Diet** – Making sure your children eat well means a diet full of whole grains, fruits and vegetables and lean protein. Teach them how to make their own healthy choices for breakfast, lunch and dinner.
- **Sleep** – Sleep is also essential to good learning. If your child is tired during the day, it will be that much harder for them to focus on learning new things. Make their sleep schedule (bedtime and wake time) consistent.
- **Exercise** – Rather than making a child with a learning disability tired, regular exercise can help your child stay alert and attentive throughout the day. Exercise can also be a great antidote to stress and frustration caused by a learning disability.

These may seem like little things, but healthy lifestyle habits may give your child an advantage in the classroom and will be important throughout life.

For more information, see Helpguide's [Healthy Eating for Kids and Teens](#) and [Tips for Getting Better Sleep: How to Sleep Well Every Night](#).

Encouraging healthy emotional habits

In addition to healthy physical habits, you can also encourage your child to have healthy emotional habits. Like you, they may be frustrated by the challenges presented by their learning disability. Try to give them outlets for expressing their anger, frustration or feelings of failure. Listen when they want to talk and create an environment open to expression. Doing so will help them connect with their feelings and, eventually, learn how to calm themselves and regulate their emotions.

Helping a learning disabled child tip 2: Take charge of your child's education

As the parent of a child with learning disability, you can take the lead in researching effective treatments and services and working with the school.

- **Learn the specifics about your child's learning disability.** Read and learn about your child's type of learning disability. Find out how the disability affects the learning process and what cognitive skills are involved. It's easier to evaluate learning techniques if you understand how the learning disability affects your child.
- **Research treatments, services, and new theories.** Along with knowing about the type of learning disability your child has, educate yourself about the most effective treatment options available. This can help you advocate for your child at school and pursue treatment at home.
- **Pursue treatment and services at home.** Even if the school doesn't have the resources to treat your child's learning disability optimally, you can pursue these options on your own at home or with a therapist or tutor.

Recognize the limitations of the school system

Parents sometimes make the mistake of investing all of their time and energy into the school as the primary solution for their child's learning disability. It is better to recognize that the school situation for your child will probably never be perfect. Too many regulations and limited funding mean that the services and accommodations your child receives may not be exactly what you envision for them, and this will probably cause you frustration, anger and stress.

Try to recognize that the school will be only one part of the solution for your child and leave some of the stress behind. Your attitude (of support, encouragement and optimism) will have the most lasting impact on your child.

Helping a learning disabled child tip 3: Work with your school

If there is demonstrated educational need, the schools are required by law to develop an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that delivers *some* educational benefit, but not necessarily one that maximizes student achievement. Parents who want the best for their kids may find this standard frustrating. Understanding special education laws and your school's guidelines for services will help you get the best support for your child at school. Your child may be eligible for many kinds of accommodations and support services, but the school might not provide services unless you ask for them.



Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)

If your child has been diagnosed with a learning disability, it is best to pursue an Individualized Education Program (IEP). The IEP enables teachers, parents, and school administrators to design an educational program customized to your child's needs.

Download: [What to Expect in the Individualized Education Program \(IEP\) Process](#) (PDF)

Being a vocal advocate for your child can be challenging. You'll need superior communication and negotiation skills, and the confidence to defend your child's right to a proper education. If you need help, one option is to hire a parent advocate who can speak on your behalf.

Tips for communicating with your child's school:

- **Clarify your goals.** Before meetings, write down what you want to accomplish. Decide what is most important, and what you are willing to negotiate.
- **Be a good listener.** Allow school officials to explain their opinions. If you don't understand what someone is saying, ask for clarification. "What I hear you saying is..." can help ensure that both parties understand.
- **Offer new solutions.** You have the advantage of not being a "part of the system," and may have new ideas. Do your research and find examples of what other schools have done.
- **Keep the focus.** The school system is dealing with a large number of children; you are only concerned with your child. Help the meeting stay focused on your child. Mention your child's name frequently, don't drift into generalizations, and resist the urge to fight larger battles.
- **Stay calm, collected and positive.** Go into the meeting assuming that everyone wants to help. If you say something you regret, simply apologize and try to get back on track.
- **Don't give up easily.** If you are not satisfied with the school's response, try again.

Helping a learning disabled child tip 4: Identify how your child learns best

Everyone — learning disability or not — has their own unique learning style. Some people learn best by seeing or reading, others by listening, and still others by doing. You can help your learning disabled child by identifying his or her primary learning style: Is your child a visual learner, an auditory learner, or a kinesthetic learner? Once you know how your child learns best, you can take steps to make sure that type of learning is reinforced in the classroom and during home study.

DETERMINING YOUR CHILD'S PRIMARY LEARNING STYLE

Visual Learners:

- Learn by seeing or reading
- Do well when material is presented and tested visually, not verbally
- Benefit from written notes and directions, diagrams, charts, maps, and pictures
- Often love to draw, read, and write; are good spellers and organizers

Auditory Learners:

- Learn by listening
- Do well in lecture-based learning environments and on oral reports and tests
- Benefit from classroom discussions, spoken directions, study groups
- Often love music, languages, and being on stage

Kinesthetic Learners:

- Learn by doing and moving
- Do well when they can move, touch, explore, and create in order to learn
- Benefit from hands-on activities, lab classes, props, skits, and field trips
- Often love sports, drama, dance, martial arts, and arts and crafts

Learning tips and tools for visual learners:



- Use books, videos, computers, visual aids, and flashcards.
- Make detailed, color-coded or highlighted notes.
- Make outlines, diagrams, and lists.
- Use drawings and illustrations (preferably in color).
- Take detailed notes in class.

Learning tips and tools for auditory learners:

- Read notes or study materials aloud.
- Memorize using word associations and verbal repetition.
- Study with other students, talk things through.
- Listen to books on tape or other audio recordings.
- Use a tape recorder to listen to lectures again later.

Learning tips and tools for kinesthetic learners:



- Get hands on: do experiments, take field trips.
- Use activity-based study tools, like role-playing or model building.

- Study in small groups and take frequent breaks.
- Use memory games and flash cards.
- Study with music on in the background.

Learning disabilities and giftedness

A high percentage of children with learning disabilities are very bright. Some gifted and talented children are misdiagnosed with learning disabilities, but some do have learning disabilities, or at least display characteristics, social and emotional, of learning disabilities.

Even though children with learning disabilities struggle in one area of learning, they may excel in another. Pay attention to your child's interests and passions. Helping them develop their passions and strengths will probably help them with the areas of difficulty as well.

Helping a learning disabled child tip 5: Think *life* success, rather than *school* success

Success means different things to different people, but your hopes and dreams for your child probably extend beyond attending a top notch college, and may include a fulfilling job, loving relationships, a family and a sense of contentment. Your child's *life* success depends, not on academics, but on things like a healthy sense of self, the willingness to ask for and accept help, the determination to keep trying in spite of challenges, the ability to have healthy relationships with others, and other qualities that aren't as easy to quantify as grades and SAT scores.

A 20-year study that followed children with learning disabilities into adulthood identified the following six "life success" attributes.

Learning disabilities and success #1: Self-awareness and self-confidence

For children with learning disabilities, self-awareness (knowledge about strengths, weaknesses and special talents) and self-confidence are very important. Struggles in the classroom can cause children to doubt their abilities and question their strengths.

Ideas for cultivating self-awareness and self-confidence:

- Ask your child to list his or her strengths and weaknesses and talk about your own strengths and weaknesses with your child.
- Encourage your child to talk to adults with learning disabilities and to ask about their challenges.
- Work with your child on activities that are within his or her capability to achieve feelings of success and competency.
- Help your child develop his or her strengths and passions. Feeling passionate and skilled in one area may inspire hard work in other areas too.

Learning disabilities and success #2: Being proactive

A proactive person has the ability to make decisions and take action to resolve problems or achieve goals. For people with learning disabilities, being proactive also involves self-advocacy (for example, asking for a seat at the front of the classroom) and the willingness to take responsibility for choices.

- Talk with your learning disabled child about problem solving and share how you approach problems in your life.
- Ask your child how he or she approaches problems. How do problems make him or her feel? How does he or she decide what action to take?
- If your child is hesitant to make choices and take action, try to provide some “safe” situations to test the water, like choosing what to make for dinner or thinking of a solution for a scheduling conflict.
- Discuss different problems, possible decisions, and outcomes with your child. Have your child pretend to be part of the situation and make his or her own decisions.

Learning disabilities and success #3: Perseverance

Perseverance is the drive to keep going despite challenges and failures, and the flexibility to change plans if things aren’t working. Children (or adults) with learning disabilities may need to work harder and longer because of their disability.

- Talk with your learning disabled child about times when he or she persevered – why did he or she keep going? Share stories about when you have faced challenges and not given up.
- Discuss what it means to keep going even when things are not easy. Talk about the rewards of hard work, as well as the opportunities missed by giving up.
- When your child has worked hard, but failed to achieve his or her goal, discuss different possibilities for moving forward.

Learning disabilities and success #4: The ability to set goals

The ability to set goals, like perseverance, has to do with setting and achieving *realistic* and *attainable* goals and also includes a flexibility to adapt goals or adjust them according to limitations or challenges.

- Help your child identify a few short- or long-term goals and write down steps and a timeline to achieve the goals. Check in periodically to talk about progress, adjustments to the timeline and completion.
- Talk about your own short- and long-term goals with your child as well as what you do when you encounter obstacles.
- Celebrate with your child when he or she achieves goals. If certain goals are proving too hard to achieve, talk about why and how plans or goals might be adjusted to make them possible.

Learning disabilities and success #5: Knowing how to ask for help

Strong support systems are key for people with learning disabilities. Successful people are able to ask for help when they need it and reach out to others for support.

- Help your child nurture and develop good relationships. Model what it means to be a good friend and relative so your child knows what it means to help and support others.
- Show your child how to ask for help in family situations.
- Share examples of people needing help, how they got it, and why it was good to ask for help. Present your child with role-play scenarios that might require help.

Learning disabilities and success #6: The ability to handle stress

If children with learning disabilities learn how to regulate stress and calm themselves, they will be much better equipped to overcome challenges.

- Use words to identify feelings and help your child learn to recognize specific feelings.
- Ask your child what words they would use to describe stress? Does your child recognize the warning signs of stress?
- Encourage your child to identify activities that help reduce stress like sports, games, music, or writing in a journal. Experiment with different stress reduction techniques with them.
- Ask your child to describe activities that cause stress. Break down the scenarios and talk about how overwhelming feelings of stress and frustration might be avoided.



The skills listed above are important for your child, but also apply to your journey as the parent of a child with learning disabilities too. The best way to teach your child these skills is to demonstrate them yourself as you work through this challenge and others that you might be facing.

To learn more, see [Emotional Intelligence \(EQ\): Five Key Skills for Raising Your Emotional Intelligence](#)

Helping a learning disabled child tip 6: Take care of yourself, too

Sometimes the hardest part of parenting is remembering to take care of you. It's easy to get caught up in what your child needs, while forgetting your own needs. But your physical and emotional resources are vital to your job as a parent. You need to be relaxed, focused, and positive in order to provide the encouragement, support, and love your learning disabled child needs.

Your spouse, friends, and family members can be helpful teammates if you can find a way to include them and learn to ask for help when you need it.

Tips for taking care of yourself:

- Learn how to manage stress and help your children learn to regulate theirs.
- Keep the lines of communication open – with your child, your spouse, your family, and friends.
- Take care of yourself by eating well and getting enough rest.
- Join a learning disorder support group to get encouragement and advice from other parents.
- Enlist teachers, therapists, and tutors whenever possible to share some of responsibility for day-to-day academic responsibilities.

See [Improving Emotional Health: Strategies and Tips for Good Mental Health](#).

Related articles



[Learning Disabilities in Children](#)

Learning Disability Symptoms, Types, and Testing



[Parenting Children with ADD / ADHD](#)

Advice for Helping Your Child

More Helpguide articles:

- [ADD / ADHD in School](#): Helping Children with ADHD Succeed at School
- [Healthy Eating for Kids and Teens](#): Helping Your Kids Develop Healthy Eating Habits
- [Tips for Getting Better Sleep](#): How to Sleep Well Every Night
- [Stress Management](#): How to Reduce, Prevent, and Cope with Stress
- [Improving Emotional Health](#): Strategies and Tips for Good Mental Health

Need More Help?



Bring Your Life Into Balance: Emotional Skills Toolkit

Is stress or your emotions getting in the way of your ability to remain calm and focused enough to help and support your child? This toolkit can help you have the most positive impact with your child. [Go to Toolkit »](#)

Related links for parenting children with learning disabilities

Help and support for parents of children with learning disabilities

[Life Success for Students with a Learning Disability: A Parent's Guide](#) – Article about the importance of certain traits for long term success. (LDOnline.org)

[National Center for Learning Disabilities Parent Center](#) – Extensive information for parents of learning disabled kids, including being your child's advocate in the school, and coping strategies to use at home. (NCLD.org)

[Parent Tips](#) – Overview of the learning disability testing process and advice for parents, plus detailed information about how to evaluate and the best ways to teach a child with a learning disability. (LDOnline.org)

[Talking about LD & AD/HD](#) – Collection of articles that offer ideas about how to talk with children about learning disabilities and personal success stories of those who have learning disabilities. (SchwabLearning.org)

[Supporting Family Members](#) – A great range of articles discussing the important topic of how learning disorders affect families. (SchwabLearning.org)

[Communicating with Your Child's School through Letter Writing](#) – Discusses the importance of written communication and documentation in working with schools providing services for learning disabilities. Includes sample letters. (LDOnline.org)

Special education services for children with learning disabilities

[Developing an IEP](#) - Developed to help teachers and parents develop and carry out an IEP including templates and forms. ([iep4u.com](#))

[Overview of the IEP Process](#) – Detailed explanation provided by the U.S. Department of Education outlining the steps involved in the IEP process for children with learning disabilities. (ed.gov)

[Questions Often Asked by Parents About Special Education Services](#) – Describes what makes a child eligible or not eligible for special education services under the IDEA and takes you through the IEP process when dealing with a learning disability. (NICHCY.org)

[Response to Intervention \(RTI\): A Primer for Parents](#) – Describes the RTI process and how it might affect your child's school based services. (LDOnline.org)

[IDEA Parent Guide](#) – Guide to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. A great resource for navigating the meetings, tests, and negotiations that will help make the school an active partner in your child's education. (National Center for Learning Disabilities)

[Understanding the IEP Process](#) and [Developing Your Child's IEP](#) – In-depth information about how schools compile IEPs for children with learning disabilities and the role parents play in developing them. (LDOnline.org)

[LD Evaluation Process](#) – Series of articles to help you understand how students are tested for learning disabilities. (SchwabLearning.org)

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