

The Relationship Between ADHD and Learning Disabilities

Is ADHD a Learning Disability?

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Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is not a learning disability; however, it does make learning difficult. For example, it is hard to learn when you struggle to focus on what your teacher is saying or when you can't seem to be able to sit down and pay attention to a book.

You can have both. Learning disabilities (LD) and ADHD often co-exist. In his book, *Taking Charge of ADHD: The Complete Authoritative Guide for Parents*, Russell Barkley, PhD, a neuropsychologist and expert in ADHD, says children with ADHD are more likely to have a learning disability than children who do not have ADHD.

At a Glance

ADHD isn't a learning disability, but ADHD can cause problems with learning and you can have both at the same time. Both cause problems with executive function, such as the ability to follow directions, stay on task, and make plans to accomplish goals. If you suspect that you or your child has ADHD and/or a learning disability, getting the right support and interventions can help them succeed, do well in school, and live well.

ADHD and Learning Disabilities

Learning involves using the brain's executive functions, particularly the ability to focus, pay attention, engage with a task, and use working memory. We know that ADHD affects the executive functions of the brain.

In fact, Barkley suggests that a more accurate name for ADHD could be "Developmental Disorder of Executive Functioning."

Many people with ADHD can struggle with learning and schoolwork because of the executive function problems related to their ADHD, yet they do not have enough of an impairment to be diagnosed with a learning disability.

When a person has co-existing conditions of ADHD and learning disability, it means they have a broad impairment of executive functions combined with the impairment of the particular skills needed for reading, writing, and math.

Evidence suggests that kids with ADHD are more likely to have a learning disability. Kids with learning disabilities are also more likely to be diagnosed with ADHD.

How ADHD Affects Learning

On its own, ADHD can affect learning in a number of ways. In addition to reduced executive function, people with ADHD may:

- Have a harder time paying attention
- Struggle to remain still and on-task
- Engage in impulsive behavior
- Not pay attention to details
- Struggle to organize tasks and study materials

It is also important to recognize that ADHD is a neurotype with benefits that can positively affect learning. For example, some people with ADHD experience

hyperfocus, which allows them to focus very intensely on the topics that interest them.

What Are Learning Disabilities?

Learning disabilities are neurological and do not reflect you or your child's intelligence or how hard you are trying. A popular way to describe learning disabilities is that your brain is wired differently. You receive and process information in a different way!

This can come with strengths, but it can also create challenges when people are required to learn or perform like other people who don't have learning disabilities.

Learning disabilities can make reading, writing, spelling, and math difficult. They also can affect your ability to organize and recall information, to listen and speak, and can impact your short-term and long-term memory and timing.

The term learning disabilities is a collective term for a range of specific learning challenges. Learning disabilities are not problems with learning due to vision or hearing problems, learning a second language, etc.

People with learning disabilities often have average or above-average intelligence, yet there is a discrepancy between their achievements and potential. However, with the proper support and interventions, they can close that gap and demonstrate their skills.

Examples of Learning Disabilities

- **Dyslexia:** A disorder that affects language processing and makes reading, writing, speaking, and understanding words more challenging
- **Dyscalculia:** A condition that causes problems with math, including difficulty with numbers and reasoning
- **Dysgraphia:** A condition that makes it more difficult to write due to problems with memory, vocabulary, spelling, and grammar

- **Dyspraxia:** A condition that causes problems with motor skills
- **Dysphasia/Aphasia:** A condition that causes impairments in speech and language
- **Auditory processing disorder:** A condition that causes the brain to misinterpret auditory information, making it more difficult to process sounds
- **Visual processing disorder:** A condition that causes issues with the way the brain processes visual information

Impact of Having ADHD and a Learning Disability

Learning disabilities are often discovered in school because of problems with academic work. However, their effects go beyond the classroom walls. They can impact family relationships and life at home and at work.

In addition, learning disabilities affect a child's self-esteem. There is a general assumption that if someone is smart, they do well in school. However, this is not necessarily the case for someone who has a learning disability and ADHD.



A learning disability means a pupil experiences problems with learning and demonstrating their knowledge in the traditional way.

In addition, pupils with ADHD have difficulty conforming to neurotypical expectations in schools. For example, being able to sit still for long periods and pay attention without acting impulsively or daydreaming can be really tough for a kid with ADHD.

Kids often feel like they can't do the tasks that other children seem to be doing easily. As a result, they can feel isolated and different.

How Are Learning Disabilities and

ADHD Diagnosed?

When a person has more than one condition, it can be harder to recognize a second condition because they can mask each other. If you already have an ADHD diagnosis, it can be easy to attribute all your challenges to ADHD.

It's also important to remember that ADHD presents itself differently in everyone. The same goes for learning disabilities. This makes recognizing them harder. There is no definitive checklist that professionals can use to make a diagnosis.

Like ADHD, there is a strong genetic component to learning disabilities. If you or your partner have a learning disability, your children could have one too.



Remember, knowledge is power. Learn as much as possible about learning disabilities and ADHD. If you or your child have already been diagnosed with ADHD and are following a treatment plan but still facing challenges, it could be that there is another condition present.

Who Can Make a Diagnosis?

Different specialists are qualified to test and diagnose different conditions. There might be variations depending on where you live and an individual clinician's qualification.

- **Child psychiatrist:** They can evaluate for ADHD but not an LD.
- **Clinical psychologist:** They can evaluate for both ADHD and LD.
- **Educational psychologist:** They can evaluate for an LD and, depending on their training, can evaluate for ADHD.
- **Neuropsychologist:** They can evaluate for both ADHD and LD.
- **School psychologist:** If they are working in a school, they can evaluate for an LD but not ADHD. However, if they are seen privately outside of school, they might be able to evaluate for and diagnose ADHD.

Treating Both ADHD and Learning Disabilities

It is important to treat both ADHD and LDs. For example, if your child is on medication to help with their ADHD, their learning disability problems will still persist. Or if they are receiving assistance for their LD, they will not get the full benefit if they are struggling with their focus and impulsivity.



Research has shown that getting the right diagnosis and support can help improve learning outcomes.

It is important to remember that having ADHD and a learning disability means that your brain works differently. This means that the right type of treatment and support depends on the individual and their needs.

Strategies that can help include:

- **Education about ADHD and learning disabilities:** Caregivers and educators should learn more about what it means to have ADHD and a learning disability and what people can do to provide the right type of support.
- **Try different strategies:** Managing some of your ADHD traits might require different strategies and you'll need to experiment to figure out what works for you. For example, some people find daily planners helpful, while others don't. Some may find visual times much more effective.
- **Consider medication:** Some people with ADHD may benefit from medications. Research suggests that ADHD medications may help people with learning and educational success.
- **Work with an experienced professional:** Talking to a professional who has lived experience with ADHD and learning disabilities is important. They can provide perspective and knowledgeable information about what helps (and what doesn't).

6 Sources

Verywell Mind uses only high-quality sources, including peer-reviewed studies, to support the facts

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