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Who is the Student with a Specific Learning Disability?

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NRCLD developed this brief to help you understand different definitions and interpretations of the term “specific learning disability.”

In education, the term learning disability is used to describe specific kinds of problems that an individual has with understanding or using spoken or written language. A student with a specific learning disability may have difficulty listening, thinking, speaking, reading, writing, spelling, or doing math problems. You may have heard of dyslexia. This is a learning disability that affects reading. Specific learning disability refers to several disorders, such as dyslexia, which affect reading or language.

Learning disabilities are not visible (like those of individuals who have physical disabilities), so they often are unrecognized. They can't be “fixed” or “cured.” But special instruction, accommodations, support services, and aids can help students lessen the effects of the learning disability by using acquired methods and strategies to compensate for the difficulties one has in learning.

Most states and many schools use the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA 2004) (Public Law 108-446) description of specific learning disability to define learning disability when determining special education eligibility and services. The IDEA 2004 definition states:

(A) GENERAL - The term means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations.

(B) DISORDERS INCLUDED - Such term includes such conditions as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia.

(C) DISORDERS NOT INCLUDED - The term does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbances, or of any environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.

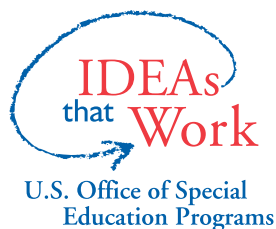
This is the “official” definition of a learning disability, but interpretations of this official definition can vary among schools and even among staff members within one school. The definition of specific learning disabilities is important in that it affects who is eligible for special education services, what those services will be, and who will pay for them.

Students with specific learning disabilities may have below-average to average to above-average intelligence. However, they have problems obtaining knowledge and showing their knowledge and understanding in specific skill areas, which causes them to struggle in school and do poorly compared to their peers. Having a learning disability doesn't mean a student can't learn. It just means these students may have to learn in different ways from their peers and with specific instructional aids and using different strategies.

Schools often base learning disability determination on the difference between a student's IQ

and level of achievement in specific skill areas—for example, math calculation or word recognition. Recent research and practice now encourage schools to take a broader look at the student when determining whether the student has a specific learning disability. What is the student’s attention span? thinking process? memory capabilities? comprehension? Is English the student’s primary language? Does the student make progress when provided proven instructional practices? Does the student perform the same socially and behaviorally as academically? These are but a sampling of questions that might be considered when distinguishing the student with a specific learning disability from a student who has other difficulties preventing academic success.

Because of all the considerations, the process for identifying a student with specific learning disabilities remains difficult, regardless of the method used. It is crucial to design instruction formatively with continuing collection of assessment data to determine whether the instruction is helping the student learn. With such assessment feedback, the teacher can revise the instructional program as needed to ensure strong learning outcomes.



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