

Steps to Help Children with Learning Differences.

Many children have learning differences which has a big impact not just on their learning but on emotional development and their sense of self.

- Much research that shows that children who have learning disabilities are at risk for having lower self-esteem and self worth than their peers. From an early age children compare themselves with others in areas such as academics, the ability to make and keep friends, and athletic ability. For younger children the comparisons and subsequent self-judgment can be rather simplistic or “black and white.” Children with learning disabilities may judge themselves as “stupid”, “slow” or “dumb” based on academic comparisons with other children. These self-judgments are often global in nature such that a child who is having difficulty at school may perceive themselves negatively in all areas of their development.
- Children who are diagnosed with learning disabilities have likely been having difficulty in school for many years before the actual diagnosis. Because the diagnosis of a learning disability is often based on a discrepancy between a child’s academic competence and their measured IQ score, it is more difficult to diagnosis children before 1st or 2nd grade simply because expectations for academic achievement are not that high. Subsequently, children with learning disabilities may have endured many years of negatively comparing themselves to their peers and developing lowered self-esteem and self-worth before being formally diagnosed.

After a diagnosis is made, children and families need help understanding the diagnosis and label. For some children and families, the diagnosis can bring relief as there is now have a label to help explain the academic difficulties. For other children and families the label may be stigmatizing and can lead to more negative appraisal of child’s abilities. As professionals who work with children with learning disabilities we have important role in helping these children recognize both their areas of difficulty and their areas of strength. We also need to educate children and families about the nature of learning disabilities. Families need to hear that children with learning disabilities are bright; they just have a deficit in a particular area of learning. The message that learning disabled children have average or even above average IQ is one that bears repeating often, to children as well as families.

Learning disabled children have often spent many years struggling in school and feeling “stupid.” They have likely felt confused, discouraged and hopeless as their efforts do not produce a desired result. Some learning disabled children become immobilized by failure and develop “learned helplessness”, an attitude of “why bother when I always fail?” It is our job to help children undo these negative self-evaluations and see themselves in a realistic light. Learning disabled children often need support around assimilating both positive and negative characteristics in to their self-image.

While much time is spent helping learning disabled children master academic skills, we should also be working on improving self-esteem through recognition and appreciation of their areas of strength. Some ideas for parents, educators and others who work with LD children:

- 1) Help the child feel special and appreciated. There is research that shows that the presence of at least one adult who makes a child feel special and appreciated leads to greater resilience and hopefulness in the child. Children feel special when their efforts are appreciated, when adults notice what makes them different in a positive light and when adults carve out special time to spend with the child
- 2) Help the child with problem solving and decision making skills. Solid problem solving skills have been linked to higher self-esteem. Instead of providing a child with the solution to their difficulty (whether academically, socially etc) help the child brainstorm possible solutions and the possible consequences of different decisions.
- 3) Avoid judgmental comments and praise the effort children put into their work. Often children with learning disabilities are putting effort into their work but still struggle. Help the child around finding new strategies for learning that will help them feel more successful.
- 4) Be empathic around the child's special learning needs and their level of frustration when learning.
- 5) Don't compare learning disabled children with peers or siblings
- 6) Highlight a child's strengths in non-academic areas whether in music, art, athletics etc. Or highlight the strengths of their personality (kindness, tenacity, helpfulness, sense of humor etc.)
- 7) Provide opportunities for a child to help. Helping others helps a child show that they have something to offer their family and community. Children often enjoy participating in volunteer activities with their friends and family. Helping others bolsters self-esteem.
- 8) Have realistic expectations. If we have realistic expectations about a child's performance it will help the child develop a sense of control.

By working together, professionals and parents should help the learning disabled child overcome both academic difficulties and the subsequent self-esteem difficulties that often arise. If we can appreciate the learning disabled child in a holistic manner, the child should also learn to appreciate their own unique strengths.

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