

**MY CHILD IS REALLY STRUGGLING IN SCHOOL.
COULD IT BE A LEARNING DISABILITY?
by Dr. Ana L. Gómez**

When you find that a child is doing poorly in school, there may be many reasons to explain this difficulty. One conclusion that teachers and parents often assume is that the child is not trying hard enough or is neglecting his academic responsibilities. Although this may be the case at times, often there are other explanations, including social/emotional factors that are making it difficult for the child to succeed or even a medical condition that can contribute to academic problems. It is also important to determine whether or not the child has had adequate opportunity to succeed or adequate exposure to a school or learning environment. Another explanation is that the child is struggling with a learning disability that is interfering with his ability to learn. But what does "learning disability" really mean?

By definition, a learning disabled student is unable to achieve to his estimated level of intelligence. The estimated level of intelligence, or IQ, is considered to be the student's potential for learning. In other words, if a student has average intelligence, he would be expected to have average academic achievement. However, some children with even the highest IQ levels truly struggle to succeed academically. Learning disabled children are unable to succeed academically because of a disorder in the way they learn or process information. They have the capacity to learn, as is demonstrated in the IQ score, but cannot do so efficiently. As a result, they may have difficulty taking in, organizing, storing, and expressing information. In a learning disabled student, these problems are not considered to be due to emotional, physical, or environmental problems.

All children have strengths and weaknesses, but some have such significant weaknesses or learning disabilities that require specialized interventions to help them overcome or compensate for these weaknesses. Interventions can include accommodations or modifications to the child's current curriculum or learning program, allowing the child to have an equal opportunity for academic success. Early detection and intervention for a learning disability is critical to help prevent further academic delays, and avoid damaging self-confidence.

If you find yourself wondering if your child may have a learning disability, think about his past performance both at school and at home. Ask his teachers, both past and present, for feedback. Learning disabled students often show an inconsistency in their skills. They may be able to do a task one day, but not the next; or they may be able to demonstrate a skill in a small group or one to one environment, but not in the larger classroom. Concerns to look for include difficulties with: grasping new concepts, concentrating for long periods of time, completing a task in a reasonable amount of time, following directions, or remembering things.

In determining if a learning disability exists, a child needs to participate in a professional evaluation. Evaluation for a learning disability should include an assessment of the child's intelligence, a measure of his level of academic achievement, and tests of his processing abilities, including strengths and weaknesses. When all of this information is gathered, the evaluator can determine if there is a discrepancy between the academic skills and the intelligence level, or if there is a processing problem. An evaluator will also ask the parent many questions about the child's medical, school, family, and emotional history to make sure that there is not another explanation for why the child may be struggling.

If you want to know more about your child's learning style, or are concerned that your child may have a learning disability, ask his teacher for feedback. If you believe your child may have a learning disability, consider having him professionally evaluated to determine the interventions necessary to help him succeed. An evaluation can be obtained through the school or with an independent psychologist who specializes in this area.

The best thing you can do is better understand your child's problem. Early detection is the first step towards preparing your child for future success.

For more information about specific learning disabilities, talk to your child's teacher, school principal, an education specialist, or a psychologist.