Adult EAL & Learning Disabilities

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ESL Instruction for Learning Disabled Adults

The lack of Success some adults experience in learning may be due to learning disabilities (Lowry, 1990; Osher & Webb, 1994). An Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities identifies persons of average or above average intelligence who encounter significant difficulties with listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities or with social skills as learning disabled (Langner, 1993, Osher & Webb, 1994). Little is known about how these disabilities affect adults studying English as a second language (ESL).

This digest looks at what "is" known about learning disabilities and adult ESL learners, and addresses the following questions: How do learning disabilities affect the progress of adults learning English? How can learning disabled adults be identified and assessed? What kinds of instructional methods work best with this population? What kind of preparation is needed for teachers who work with them?

Learning Disabilities and Second Language Learning

Learning disabilities can affect every aspect of learning. They may impair multiple skills and abilities or they may impair only one. For example, difficulties with spelling may affect learners' writing skills, but not their reading skills. Learners may show learning disabilities in their second language yet not in their first. Often a subtle learning disability in the first language is masked by an individual's compensatory strategies (e.g., getting general information about what is said or written through the overall context when specific words or concepts are not understood or substituting known words for words that cause difficulty). However, these strategies may not be available to the learner in the new language (Ganschow & Sparks, 1993; Lowry, 1990).

Identifying ESL Adults With Learning Disabilities

It is difficult to determine how many adult ESL learners have learning disabilities. Estimates of the total U.S. adult population who are learning disabled range from as low as 3% to as high as 80% (Langner, 1993; Lowry, 1990; McCormick, 1991; Osher & Webb, 1994). The percentage of learning disabled students in adult education classes may exceed that of the population as a whole (Lowry, 1990). It is not known, however, if this is true in adult ESL classes.

The process of identifying anyone--adult, child, native English speaker, or ESL learner--as learning disabled can be stigmatizing (McCormick, 1991). Therefore, educators stress weighing the advantages of identifying adults as learning disabled (making them eligible for special instruction, resources, and services) against the possible stigma of the label (Lowry, 1990).

Before identifying an adult as learning disabled, other reasons for lack of expected progress should be considered.

1. Limited previous educational experience may hinder progress in learning, that is, lack of exposure to classroom behaviors (using a pencil, repeating after a teacher, "reading" from a chalkboard, etc.) may be new and difficult for the learner with little or no prior schooling.

2. The lack of effective study habits may cause problems in learning.

3. The interference of a learner's native language may complicate the process of learning English. (For example, the spelling problems of an Arab student might be explained by the change in

alphabet from Arabic to English; his slow reading by the change of direction in reading.) In fact, some of the problems of learning disabled language learners may be similar to those of all students beginning to learn a second language. However, with the non- disabled learner, these problems should lessen over time.

4. A mismatch between the instructor's teaching style and the learner's expectations of how the class will be conducted may slow progress in learning the language.

5. External problems with work, health, and family may account for lack of progress in the second language classroom.

Assessing the Learner

Using standardized tests to identify learning disabilities presents problems: First, instruments designed to diagnose learning disabilities are usually normed on native English speakers. Therefore, the results cannot be reliably used with learners whose first language is not English. Portions of some tests can give a clear idea of a learner's strengths and weaknesses, but simple scores based on a whole test are not always reliable. Because the concepts and language being tested may have no direct translation, the validity of tests translated into the native language is questionable. Second, the tests are primarily designed for and normed on "younger" students and may not be suitable for adults (Lowry, 1990). Finally, since no single assessment technique is sufficient to diagnose a learning disability, multiple assessment measures (including the following) are necessary.

1. An interview in the native language can provide invaluable information about the learner's previous educational experience in English and in the native language, it can alert programs to learner expectations for classroom instruction, and it can provide insight into the learner's functioning in the first language (Ganschow & Sparks, 1993; Learning Disabilities Association, 1994).

2. Portfolio assessment--in which measurements of learner progress in reading and writing are considered along with attendance data, writing samples, autobiographical information, and work on class assignments--is favored in many programs because its variety of input provides a broad picture of the learner's performance (Wrigley, 1992).

3. Phonological tests (that could include auditory discrimination exercises assessing the learners ability to distinguish between vowel sounds or between nonsense words) may suggest difficulties the learner could experience with sound-related aspects of the language (Ganschow & Sparks, 1993).

4. Visual screening and routine hearing tests may prove that what appear to be reading or listening and speaking disabilities may be due, in part, to correctable auditory or visual problems (McCormick, 1991).

Instructional Methods and Materials

Learning disabilities affect learning in any language and must therefore be a guiding factor in designing instruction for adult learners with disabilities. Educators of learning disabled children and adults (Baca & Cervantes, 1991; Ganschow & Sparks, 1993; Lowry, 1990) give the following suggestions for providing instruction.

1. Be highly structured and predictable.

2. Include opportunities to use several senses and learning strategies.

3. Provide constant structure and multisensory review.

4. Recognize and build on learners' strengths and prior knowledge.

5. Simplify language but not content; emphasize content words and make concepts accessible through the use of pictures, charts, maps, timelines, and diagrams.

6. Reinforce main ideas and concepts through rephrasing rather than through verbatim repetition.

Technology can help adult learners with learning disabilities to acquire a second language, but its use is not well documented. Raskind and Scott (1993) discuss the use of electronic aids for this population. Devices such as personal computers, hand-held translators and dictionaries, personal data keepers, and cassette recorders are useful as are more sophisticated learning tools such as speech synthesizers and reading machines that allow learners to hear as well as see what is displayed on the computer. Also recommended are televisions with closed-caption capabilities and VCR decoding devices that transcribe and project spoken dialogue on the screen. (See Parks, 1994, for discussion of the use of VCR decoding devices with adult ESL learners.)

Teacher Training For Instruction and Assessment

In elementary and secondary level ESL programs, the need for teachers trained in both ESL and special education has been recognized for some time, and various teacher training models team ESL instructors and special education instructors (Baca & Cervantes, 1991). In adult basic education and adult ESL, where less time and money are available for program capacity building through research and teacher training, there are fewer models to look to. However, two programs have been funded to do research on adult ESL learners with learning disabilities.

1. The Arlington Education and Employment Program (REEP) has received a grant from the Virginia Adult Educators Research Network to explore ways teachers can assist adult ESL students who may be learning disabled to acquire and retain basic literacy in a learner-centered classroom or computer lab. Through the use of a combination of standardized assessment tools, portfolio assessment, and narrative case studies of students who do not make expected progress, REEP hopes to find a few specific techniques that benefit not only students with learning disabilities, but all students in the program (L. Terrill, personal communication, January 3, 1995).

2. The Learning Disabilities Association (LDA) in Minneapolis, in a project funded by the Minnesota Department of Education and Medtronics, Inc., used a combination of measures at the Lehmann ABE center to assess adult ESL learners who were suspected of having learning disabilities. The assessment included some standardized tests--the Basic English Skills Test (BEST), the Learning Styles Inventory, a phonics inventory, and the Test of Non-verbal Intelligence-R (Toni-R)--as well as some alternative assessment--learner observations by teachers and learning disabilities specialists, and native language writing samples and interviews. Project findings suggest that learning disabled adult ESL students benefit most when learning disabilities specialists and ESL teachers work together to plan instruction that is individualized, multisensory, phonics-based, and delivered in an environment where the learner is comfortable--generally the regular classroom (LDA, 1994).

Conclusion

As the extent of learning disabilities in the adult ESL population becomes more evident, training in issues and instructional methods related to learning disabilities will need to be part of

professional development for all adult ESL educators. Research leading to the development of guidelines for assessment and instruction must be funded. Broader cooperation among the fields of ESL, adult education, and special education should ensure that the instructional needs of learning disabled ESL adults are being met.

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What Are Learning Disabilities?

Written by NCLD Editorial Team

Learning disabilities (LDs) are real. They affect the brain's ability to receive, process, store, respond to and communicate information. LDs are actually a group of disorders, not a single disorder.

Learning disabilities are *not* the same as intellectual disabilities (formerly known as mental retardation), sensory impairments (vision or hearing) or autism spectrum disorders. People with LD are of average or above-average intelligence but still struggle to acquire skills that impact their performance in school, at home, in the community and in the workplace. Learning disabilities are lifelong, and the sooner they are recognized and identified, the sooner steps can be taken to circumvent or overcome the challenges they present.

How Can You Tell If Someone Has a Learning Disability?

The hallmark sign of a learning disability is a distinct and unexplained gap between a person's level of expected achievement and their performance. Learning disabilities affect every person differentlyand they present differently at various stages of development. LDs can range from mild to severe and it is not uncommon for people to have more than one learning disability. In addition, about one-third of individuals with LD also have Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). While LD and ADHD can share common features, such as difficulties with concentration, memory, and organizational skills, they are not the same types of disorder. Unfortunately, LD is often confused with ADHD and is frequently mistaken as laziness or associated with disorders of emotion and behavior. A careful and thorough review of concerns, with input from multiple sources (including parents, educators, physicians, psychologists, speech-language providers and, of course, the person themselves) is the only way to rule in or rule out a learning disability.

Learning disabilities can affect a person's ability in the areas of

- Listening
- Speaking
- Reading
- Writing
- Spelling
- Reasoning
- Mathematics

See the chart below for specific types of learning disabilities and related disorders.

LD Terminology

Disability	Area of difficulty	Symptoms include trouble with	Example
Dyslexia	Processing language	• Reading • Writing • Spelling	Confusing letter names and sounds, difficulties blending sounds into words, slow rate of reading, trouble remembering after reading text
Dyscalculia	Math skills	• Computation • Remembering math facts • Concepts of time and money	Difficulty learning to count by 2s, 3s, 4s, poor mental math skills, problems with spatial directions
Dysgraphia	Written expression	• Handwriting • Spelling • Composition	Illegible handwriting, difficulty organizing ideas for writing
Dyspraxia	Fine motor skills	• Coordination • Manual dexterity	Trouble with scissors, buttons, drawing

Information Processing Disorders

Disability	Area of difficulty	Symptoms include trouble with	Example
Auditory Processing Disorder	Interpreting auditory information	• Language development • Reading	Difficulty anticipating how a speaker will end a sentence
Visual Processing Disorder	Interpreting visual information	• Reading • Writing • Math	Difficulty distinguishing letters like "h" and "n"

Other Related Disorders

Disability	Area of difficulty	Symptoms include trouble with	Example
Attention-Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)	Concentration and focus	• Over-activity • Distractibility • Impulsivity	Can't sit still, loses interest quickly, daydreams

What Causes Learning Disabilities?

Experts aren't exactly sure what causes learning disabilities. In fact, there is often no apparent cause for LD. LD may be due to

- **Heredity**. Often learning disabilities run in families. Children with LD are likely to have parents or other relatives with similar difficulties.
- **Problems during pregnancy and birth**. An illness or injury during or before birth may cause an LD. Drug and alcohol use during pregnancy, low birth weight, lack of oxygen and premature or prolonged labor may also lead to an LD.
- **Incidents after birth**. Serious illness, head injuries, poor nutrition and exposure to toxins such as lead can contribute to LD.

Learning disabilities are not caused by economic disadvantage or cultural differences, nor are they the result of lack of educational opportunity. That said, children who are denied timely and effective instruction during critical times during their development are at high risk for showing signs of LD during the school years and beyond.

Are Learning Disabilities Common?

Today, approximately 2.4 million school-aged children in the U.S. are identified as having specific learning disabilities (SLD) and receive some kind of special education support.[1] These numbers do not include children in private and religious schools or those who are home-schooled.

What Can You Do About Learning Disabilities?

Learning disabilities are lifelong challenges. Although they don't go away, they should not stop individuals from achieving their goals. A learning disability is not a disease, and there is no single course of treatment or intervention that works for everyone. The first step to overcoming the challenges posed by LD is to recognize that a problem might exist. Then seek help from qualified professionals, who can provide guidance through a personalized evaluation process. Working with a trusted team of professionals, it is then possible to identify the types of accommodations, services and supports that will lead to success.

Identification

The LD identification process is not set in stone and will vary from state to state (for school age children) and from one adult to another depending upon the nature of the presenting difficulties and the professionals enlisted to provide testing and guidance. For example, an elementary school age child who shows signs of dyslexia (specific LD in reading) might demonstrate excellent skills in math, so an evaluation would be tailored to better understand the specific components of reading (i.e., phonemic awareness, comprehension, automaticity) that would help with planning an appropriate course of instruction and intervention.

[If a parent suspects that their child might have a learning disability](), it is important that they record (in writing) their observations and share them with, teachers, physicians and others who might be able to confirm or add important detail. If informal efforts to help the child overcome these difficulties is not successful (over a short period of time the next step is to initiate (in writing) a request to begin a formal evaluation process.

LD In Children

Early identification—the earlier, the better—is vital in helping a child to succeed academically and socially. Careful and honest observation is a key to understanding how well a child is progressing in their development of skills in important areas such as expressive and receptive language, fine and gross motor coordination, attention and socialization. Even preschoolers can show signs of risk for LD. And for some children, LD does not present itself until middle school or even high school.

Do you think your child is displaying signs of a learning disability? Don't panic. Not all children who are slow to develop skills have LD. Share your concerns with classroom teachers and others who come in contact with your child. And don't shy away from seeking more detail information and assistance. There is no shame in having a learning disability. The shame is knowing that there is a problem and not providing the help a child needs and deserves.

Once a child is found to have a learning disability, learn as much as possible about the types of supports that are available through school and in the community. Just as important, help the child to understand their specific challenges, assure them that LD is not an insurmountable hurdle and that they are not alone: other children struggle, too, and adults are there to help.

LD In Adults

It is never too late to identify and get help for a learning disability. Finding out about a learning disability can be a great relief to adults who could not explain the reason for their struggles in the past. [Testing for LD in adulthood]() is not uncommon, and seeking support and services (a legal entitlement through the [Americans with Disabilities Act]() is key to leading a successful and productive life.

Accommodations and Modifications

Once a learning disability is identified, different kinds of assistance can be provided. In addition to specialized, explicit types of instruction, children with LD are entitled to have accommodations (such as extended time, readers, and note-takers) or modifications (such as abbreviated tests or alternate assignments) as appropriate. These guarantees are afforded to children with LD by law.

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997 and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, people of all ages with LD—children and adults—are protected against discrimination and have a right to different forms of assistance in the classroom and workplace.

Learning Disability Fast Facts

Written by NCLD Editorial Team

What Are Learning Disabilities?

- Learning disabilities (LD) are a group of varying disorders that have a negative impact on learning. They may affect one's ability to speak, listen, think, read, write, spell or compute. The most prevalent LD is in the area of reading, known as dyslexia.
- Currently 2.4 million students are diagnosed with LD and receive special education services in our schools, representing 41% of all students receiving special education.[1]
- They are life long and cannot be cured; however, the effects of an LD may be mitigated to support learning, living and earning, particularly when identified early and dealt with effectively.
- Intellectual disability (once referred to as mental retardation), autism, deafness, blindness, behavioral disorders, and ADD or ADHD are not learning disabilities; however, these conditions are frequently confused with LD.
- While students with LD continue to represent the largest group served by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the special education law (41%), the number of school-age students identified with LD has seen a steady decline during the past 10 years.[2]

Outcomes

While some educational outcomes for students with learning disabilities have shown improvements in recent years, overall they remain unacceptably low.

- Close to half of secondary students with LD perform more than three grade levels below their enrolled grade in essential academic skills (45% in reading, 44% in math).[3]
- 67% of students with LD graduate from high school[4] with a regular diploma vs. 74% of students in the general population.[5]
- 20% of students with LD drop out of high school[6] vs. 8% of students in the general population.[7]
- 10% of students with LD are enrolled in a four-year college within two years of leaving school, compared with 28% of the general population.[8]
- Among working-age adults with LD versus those without LD: 55% vs. 76% are employed; 6% vs. 3% of adults are unemployed; and 39% vs. 21% are not in the labor force partly because of lack of education.[9]

Learning Styles vs. Learning Disabilities

Written by Sheldon H. Horowitz, EdD

Truth be told, learning disabilities (LD) are not easily explained. While they are "specific" to any number of areas of learning (such as reading, math and writing) they are also often overlapping or co-occurring, meaning that individuals with LD can have significant challenges in more than one area of skill development and performance.

Because learning doesn't take place in a vacuum, social-emotional and behavioral issues often mask or exacerbate the effects of LD. And as individuals are exposed to new information, gain new insights and experience, and build their own menus of strategies to overcome or work around their areas of struggle, the impact of their learning disabilities can change, for better or for worse. Add a person's overall personality and motivation and other factors like opportunities to expand one's repertoire of effective accommodations (trying things out and see if they work) to the mix, and it's clear that LD is not just one thing, is not easily captured in a simple explanation, and does not affect all individuals in the same way. Hence the appeal of talking about "learning styles" in the same breath.

Not Everyone with a Preferred Style of Learning Has LD

Look around at the people with whom you have regular contact, think about how they appear to organize themselves for learning, and how they seem to be able to accomplish different tasks with ease or with difficulty:

- "L" is a "phone person," terrific at remembering names of people, and has a knack for keeping calendar dates, appointments and call-back numbers "in her head."
- "S" dislikes talking on the phone, struggles to retrieve peoples' names but never forgets a face, and writes everything down, most often remembering details without having to refer to his notes.
- "E" is annoyed by long explanations, has little interest in reading, and is a "hands on" person, preferring to ask for information as needed and "getting the job done" without sharing thoughts, pausing for reflection or asking for feedback.

Do any of these individuals have learning disabilities?
Maybe.
Determining whether a person has learning disabilities involves formal assessment and very careful documentation including investigations of prior school experience, response to instruction, skill mastery, information processing strengths and weaknesses, motivation and more. Information about learning styles can, however, be very helpful in orchestrating opportunities for success in school, at work and in the community.

Learning Styles Explained

There are too many theories about learning styles, each with unique features, to summarize in this brief column. The core principle they share, however, is almost always the same: individuals respond to and use different types of information and approaches when engaged in learning. The most common terms that are used to describe these language styles are:

Key "style" terms	Some underlying assumptions and characteristics.
Auditory (linguistic)	Spoken language is a preferred way of taking in and responding to information.
Visual (spatial)	Visual information (e.g. printed words, maps, charts, environmental cues) are needed for ease of learning.
Kinesthetic	Engaging in hands-on activity and getting feedback from physical sensations are important and helpful in facilitating learning and in demonstrating mastery of skills.

As mentioned earlier, no one uses only one approach to learning all the time, and having strong preferences for how information is presented and how feedback (or performance) is required and evaluated is not, by itself, a sure sign of learning disabilities. Take a look at NCLD's Fact Sheets on auditory processing, visual processing, executive function and information processing disorders for information about how features of these learning styles map onto specific learning disabilities.

Self-knowledge of Learning Styles Can Lead To Success

Knowing how an individual learns best, in a variety of subject areas and given a variety of different performance tasks, can be very helpful:

- Students can (and should!) speak with teachers about the features of instruction that work best for them and request that classroom practices be adjusted to enable them to achieve success.
- Parents can support school efforts and provide the types of practice, structure and support at home that reflect learning style preferences and that lead to greater independence and school success. Be sure to engage in discussion about learning style preferences during teacher conferences and at IEP meetings.
- Educators can tailor and modify instruction to ensure that the needs of students with highly stylized learning preferences are being met (in addition to providing services and supports that address the challenges posed by specific learning disabilities).

Some Readings and Resources

- [LDPride](#)
  This Web site offers information about learning styles and Multiple Intelligence (MI). It provides a link to an online interactive assessment of learning style, and lists practical tips to make your learning style work for you.
- [Index of Learning Styles](#)
  This Web site offers a free online self-scoring questionnaire created by Drs. Felder and Soloman at North Carolina State University. The model for this questionnaire was originally formulated by Dr. Felder in collaboration with Dr. Linda K. Silverman, an educational psychologist, for use by college instructors and students in engineering and the sciences, although it has subsequently been applied in a broad range of disciplines.
- [Approaches and Study Skills Inventory for Students (ASSIST)](#)
  This paper includes a questionnaire that has been designed to allow students to describe, in a systematic way, how they go about learning and studying. The questionnaire is composed of lots of questions (many of which intentionally overlap) to cover many different ways of studying. Most of the items are based on comments made by students.
- [Multiple Intelligences](#)
  Here is a link to a simple test for young people, based on Gardner's eight multiple intelligences. It taps learning style preferences in different domains of learning: kinesthetic, logic, intrapersonal, visual/spatial, linguistic, interpersonal, musical and naturalistic intelligences.

Learning Disabilities: What They Are, and Are Not

Written by Sheldon H. Horowitz, EdD

Even though some three million school-age children are classified as having specific learning disabilities (LD), this category of special need is often widely misunderstood. Surveys of both parents and educators confirm that many people mistakenly link LD with mental retardation and disorders of mental health and believe that, left alone, children are likely to outgrow LD over time.

Let's Set the Record Straight

- The term specific learning disability refers to one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using language, spoken or written, and affects a person's ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations.
- LD does not include problems primarily due to visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, although students with such diagnoses can also have learning disabilities.
- LD does not include problems that result primarily from mental retardation or emotional disturbance, although, again, children who experience such difficulties can also have learning disabilities.

- LD does not include problems that result primarily from cultural, environmental, or economic disadvantage.
- Learning disabilities are real! Although they often aren't observed until a child is doing school-related tasks, a proven biological basis for LD exists, including emerging data that document genetic links for LD within families.
- LD is common, affecting an estimated four percent to six percent of the public school population. And if you include individuals who, for a number of reasons, struggle with reading, the numbers are considerably higher.

Learning disabilities are lifelong. That said, individuals with LD can learn to compensate for areas of weakness and, with early, effective support, can be highly successful and productive members of society.

Serving Students with LD: It's the Law!

The quality of services and support children receive in school are key to their learning success. Working together, general and special educators are charged with ensuring that all children receive a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive setting.

Although states and school districts have considerable latitude in how they meet this challenge, a few important federal laws underlie their efforts:

- The [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)](#) provides for special education services for children and youth, ages 3–21, with disabilities. It ensures each child receives a free, appropriate public education based on his or her individual needs, and it specifies 13 possible educational disabling conditions, including specific learning disabilities. It also guarantees a number of important rights—timely evaluation, access to all meetings and paperwork, transition planning, and related services—for children with disabilities and their parents or guardians. Most children with LD are served under IDEA.

- [Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973](#) is a civil rights law prohibiting discrimination on the basis of disability in programs and activities that receive federal funding. It does not provide funding for these programs, but it does permit the government to withdraw funds from programs that do not comply with the law. To qualify for services under Section 504, a person must have a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. Some schools use this law to support students with LD who need only simple accommodations or modifications. It is also frequently used for children with [Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)](#) and who do not need more-comprehensive special education support.

- The [Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)](#) is also a civil rights law that protects individuals with LD from discrimination in schools, the workplace and other settings. ADA does not provide funding for services and accommodations, and, as with Section 504, persons must have a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. Learning is considered a major life activity under ADA, so if a student qualifies for services under IDEA, he or she is also protected under ADA.

- [No Child Left Behind (NCLB)](#) is the current version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, first passed in 1965, which affects all public education, from kindergarten through grade 12. The power of NCLB is that it holds schools accountable for student progress by demanding clearly defined content standards (what students should be learning) and achievement standards (how well they should be learning). It also requires schools to measure student progress to see whether all students are making adequate yearly progress. NCLB ensures that schools report overall student progress data as well as progress for various student subgroups, including students with disabilities.

Demystifying LD: 18 Facts You Need to Know

Written by NCLD Editorial Team

Learning disabilities (LD)—what they are (and what they are not)—continue to be a source of confusion for many people. Here are some key facts to keep in mind:

What Is a Learning Disability?

- [A learning disability is a biological "processing" problem](#) that impairs a person's ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell and do math calculations.
- There are several types of LD based on the type of difficulties involved. Dyslexia, a problem with reading, is the most common.
- Learning disabilities have a genetic component and often run in families.
- LD is a lifelong disability. Children don't grow out of it. They may learn to compensate for their LD, but it's something they continue to live with as adults.
- LD is does **not** include visual, hearing or motor disabilities.
- LD is **not** caused by intellectual or cognitive disabilities (formerly referred to as mental retardation), emotional disturbance, or cultural, environmental, or economic disadvantage.

How Are Learning Disabilities Diagnosed?

- Proper identification (diagnosis) of LD in K-12 students involves: parent and child interviews; classroom observation; a review of the child's educational and medical history; a series of tests to identify the child's strengths and weaknesses; the gathering of information from teachers and other professionals who work with the child.
- There is no medical test (such as a blood test) for LD.
- [LD often co-exists with other neurological disorders such as Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)](#). This can make diagnosis/identification of the disabilities tricky.

How Common Are Learning Disabilities?

- It's estimated that 4.67 million Americans (ages six and older) have LD. That represents 1.8% of the U.S. population. (*U.S. Survey of Income and Program Participation*)
- Almost 2.4 million school-age children in the U.S. are classified as having specific learning disabilities. That represents 4–6% of all public school students.
- Almost half of public school students receiving special education services have LD.

What Help and Treatment Is Available for People With LD?

- People with LD can succeed at school and work if they have targeted instruction, meaningful accommodations, high expectations (of themselves and from others) and a support system.
- Once a student is identified with LD, the key to success is instruction that's carefully targeted, well-delivered, research-based, individualized and differentiated.
- There is no medication or medical treatment for LD, although there are many unproven, expensive and [controversial "therapies" for LD](#) on the market.

How Does the Law Protect People Who Have LD?

- The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) provides for special education services for public school students aged 3–21 with disabilities. Having LD doesn't automatically make a student eligible for special education; he or she must also go through an eligibility evaluation.
- [Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973](#) is a civil rights law prohibiting discriminating against people with disabilities in programs and activities that receive federal funding.
- The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is also a civil rights law that protects individuals with LD from discrimination in schools, the workplace and other settings.

Being Tested for LD in Adulthood

Many who struggle to learn as adults (and who struggled in their earlier school years) aren't aware that they have a learning disability (LD). Other adults who were identified with LD when they were children face new challenges in managing their LD in college, on the job, and in carrying out other adult responsibilities. If either scenario describes you or someone you care about, you'll benefit from the following information on evaluating, identifying, and managing LD in adulthood.

Many adults report feelings of relief after they're tested and identified with an LD such as [dyslexia](#), [dysgraphia](#), or [dyscalculia](#). They finally know that their difficulties in learning and performing certain tasks are not their fault and their frustration and struggles can be attributed, at least in part, to a previously undiagnosed learning disability.

If you decide to be evaluated for LD, you can look forward to learning a good deal about yourself. Some of the benefits that result from being tested for LD include:

- A detailed account of your individual struggles and strengths.
- Specific strategies, including accommodations and modifications, to help you perform more effectively at work, in school, and in everyday life.
- Recommendations for support services, such as counseling, vocational assessment, and job training.
- Recommendations for instructional strategies that will be of most help to you.
- Civil rights protection that ensures your right to accommodations at work and in school, if you are a "qualified individual with a disability" under the Americans with Disabilities Act.
- Documentation that will support your self-advocacy efforts.

The Three Steps of the LD Evaluation Process

Once you decide to be evaluated for LD, it's helpful to know what to expect. In general, there are three steps in the evaluation process:

Step 1: The Interview
You will meet with one or more qualified professionals who will ask you about your learning problems as well as your education, physical and mental health, and family and employment history. (Use our Interactive LD Checklist to start pinpointing your problem areas; share the results with the evaluator.) You should be honest in providing this information because it will help the evaluator(s) understand your background, strengths, and problem areas.

If after the interview it is decided that testing should be done, you'll need to schedule a series of appointments with qualified specialists who can help pinpoint your learning problem.

Step 2: The Evaluation
The formal evaluation usually consists of a series of tests. These tests will allow the specialist(s) to profile your areas of strength and struggle and to identify whether or not you have a learning disability. After your learning profile is developed and the type of LD you have is uncovered, an evaluator will provide guidance as to what you should do next. (Evaluators are required to keep your records and testing information confidential.)

Step 3: Recommendations
The single most important "take away" of the evaluation process is knowing what to do with your new learning profile. The evaluation should provide direction for employment, education, and daily living. You will receive a written report explaining the tests you took along with the results. If a learning disability is discovered, it will be documented in this report. The report should also include recommendations for learning strategies that may be most useful to you and it should name specific accommodations that will help you to compensate for, or work around, the effects of your disability. An accommodation such as assistive technology may help you be more successful (and feel less frustrated) in other aspects of your life

Be sure to keep a copy of this report in a place where you can find it easily because you will need it to request accommodations in school or at work. You might want to create a file folder and keep this report along with other information, such as your most recent school Individualized Education Program (if you had an IEP in school), medical history, work performance evaluations, and letters of reference from employers.

Who Pays for the LD Evaluation?

If you're an adult being evaluated for LD for the first time, or if your previous LD documentation is more than a year old, you may have to assume the costs of being tested. (Recent high school graduates with up-to-date documentation of LD should not need additional testing to qualify for services and supports as an adult with LD.) Be sure to ask any prospective evaluators about options such as sliding-scale fees and payment plans. Here are some suggestions and resources to consider to help pay for an evaluation by a qualified professional.

- Check with your health insurance company. Some policies will cover part (or all) of the costs of an evaluation, particularly if there are other problems like emotional disorders or Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder listed as reasons for referral. If you belong to an HMO, check to see if there is a psychologist or other professional on staff who can conduct an evaluation.
- Look into Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Services available in your state. VR may offer evaluation services if your LD has caused you problems in getting or keeping a job. The key here is that you must be actively seeking employment.
- Find out if any local universities with graduate programs in special education or psychology have clinics that conduct evaluations. These are often offered at substantially reduced cost.
- Check with your local county or state adult education office. They may know of private practitioners who perform evaluations on a sliding scale or at reduced cost.

Moving Ahead with New Self-Awareness

By going through the LD evaluation process, you'll learn something new about yourself. This information can help you plan for the assistance you need to succeed in school, at work, and in your personal life. Even if your evaluation results don't indicate that you have LD, you will at least have a better understanding of your overall strengths and areas for improvement.

Where to Seek Help If You Suspect You Have LD

There is only one way to know for certain if you have a learning disability: through a formal evaluation by a qualified professional who has been trained to identify learning disabilities. Such professionals may be clinical or educational psychologists, school psychologists, neuropsychologists or learning disabilities specialists. It is essential that the professional have training and direct experience working with and evaluating adults with learning disabilities.
This person should also have up-to-date information about current LD research and have a working knowledge of local, state and federal guidelines for providing help in different settings. This professional should be able to help you understand your needs relative to school, work and daily living.

Find a Qualified Professional

- [NCLD's Resource Locator](#)

- [NCLD's LD Navigator](#)
- [Learning Disabilities Association](#)
- [International Dyslexia Association](#)
- Adult education office of your local school system or community college
- Adult literacy programs or literacy councils
- Community mental health agencies
- Counseling or study skills center at a local college or university
- Educational therapists or learning specialists in private practice
- Guidance counselors in high schools
- Private schools or institutions specializing in learning disabilities
- Special education departments and/or disability support services coordinator in colleges or universities
- State Vocational Rehabilitation Services
- Local hospital-based programs

After you make contact with any of the above, ask to be referred to a professional who has experience working with adults with learning disabilities. When you meet him or her, you'll want to ask questions for reassurance that you are working with the right person.

Legal Rights and Accommodations for Adults with LD

Laws That Protect You

There are three main federal laws that protect people with learning disabilities from discrimination:

- *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004*

  Provides for special education and related services for children and young people with disabilities up to their 22nd birthday. The IDEA provides for a [Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)](#) and for an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for eligible students. [Click here for more information](#) about the most recent reauthorization of this law, IDEA 2004.

- *Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (PL 93-112)*

  Prohibits discrimination against children and adults with disabilities. It guarantees that people with disabilities have equal access to programs and services that receive federal funds. This includes public and private schools and colleges. It also applies to employers receiving federal funds.

- *Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA)*

Effective January 1, 2009 - expands the interpretation of disability under the original Americans with Disabilities Act and protects school-age children and adults with disabilities from discrimination in employment, public, and privately-operated settings. The law applies to all public and most private schools and colleges, testing agencies, and licensing authorities. It also applies to state and local governments and to private employers with 15 or more employees.

Your Rights and Responsibilities as an Adult with LD

If you have current documentation of your learning disability, you likely have the right to: Participate in educational programs without discrimination.

- Receive reasonable accommodations in courses and examinations.
- Receive reasonable accommodations in the workplace (required if there are fifteen or more employees).

However, there are responsibilities that go along with these rights. If you wish to receive the accommodations that you're entitled to under the law, you must:
 Identify yourself as a person with a learning disability. This can be done in a confidential meeting with your employer or with the disabilities services coordinator at your school.

- Provide documentation concerning your learning disability and your need for accommodations. This can simply be a letter or a report from the professional who evaluated you. It should state how your learning disability affects your performance and recommend reasonable accommodations. If requested, be prepared to share further information such as the methods used in the diagnostic process, including names of the tests given to you

Don't wait for the last minute! Request specific accommodations in a timely manner.

Accessing Support Programs in College

Being a beginner all over again is tough - whether you're starting a new job or the first year of college. Here are some tips on finding the social and academic support you'll need.

Social

- When you're faced with a whole new group of people at freshman orientation, remember that they're in the same boat you are. Take part in orientation activities. Join an intramural team or extracurricular activity to meet people who share your interests.
- If you live in a dorm, make sure to meet the Resident Advisor (R.A.) assigned to your floor. The R.A. is the person who usually organizes social events throughout the

semester. Your R.A. can be great source of information and a good listener when you have questions or concerns or when you just need to talk.

- At the start of college, you may want to stay in touch with high school friends and close relatives with whom you can talk and share the ups and downs of your new experiences. Remember that these are people who care about you. They want to share in both the good things and the not-so-good things you may be going through. Talking to or emailing these folks can be comforting as you experience many new things for the first time.

Academic

Establishing effective systems to manage time and ensure productivity can be the single most important steps you take. The pressure of trying to stick to a schedule can be stressful. It may take great effort, flexibility and practice to find systems that works for you. Consider the following steps:

- Schedule an individual session with a research librarian at your university's library. Library staff are usually skilled in researching specific topics, and they can suggest reference techniques and show you effective ways to do research online.
- Attend an orientation session and become familiar with the computer center at your school. You may need to schedule individual time with a support technician to learn about specific equipment available in the center.
- Get involved in a study group. If you decide that meeting with the group is helping you learn, stick with it.
- Visit the Disability Support Services (DSS) office at your school. Getting to know DSS support staff early in the semester will help you access support when it is most needed, perhaps later in the year school .The DSS office can help coordinate more specialized support like submitting and negotiating requests for accommodation and working through problems with specific courses.
- Look into getting a note-taker or tutor. Tutors are usually volunteers who agree to help students who need assistance in specific subjects. The DSS office recruits and matches tutors to students according to the individual student's needs.

Getting Access to Assistive Technology in College

Are you a high school student who uses assistive technology (AT) in school as a way of compensating for your learning disability? Do you have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) that requires your school to provide you with a personal talking word processor, an electronic keyboard, or other useful devices to help you stay organized and complete work assignments? If so, beware! Once you graduate from high school, you will most likely need to leave behind any AT equipment your school provided.

Will you be able to arrange to use these same or similar resources in college? Might you need or want new or different AT tools? Is it the college's responsibility to provide and pay for your AT devices, or will you have to buy your own? As you prepare for college, it's important that you know your rights and options regarding accommodations, including assistive technology devices,

as a student with a learning disability and/or AD/HD. In college, you'll be responsible to advocate for your needs and to take initiative to obtain accommodations.

Assistive Technology Defined — a Refresher

Assistive technology is defined as any item, piece of equipment, or product that is used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional abilities of people with disabilities. In other words, assistive technology is a term used to describe a device that helps you learn.

Assistive technology can range from a simple low-tech device, such as a tape recorder, to a high-tech device, such as a talking calculator. Some other examples of assistive technologies include screen readers that read aloud Internet articles and electronic text documents (even PDF files) posted by your professors, or Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) that can help you organize your daily activities and assignments.

The Laws: What Changes after High School?

Understanding how your rights to assistive technology as a college student differ from those that you had as a high school student will help you make the most of your postsecondary experience. Once you are familiar with the laws regarding AT in college, and what types of questions to ask, you can become your own assistive technology advocate.

If you received special education services while in high school, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was the law that provided you free instructional and support services (possibly including assistive technology tools) through an Individualized Education Program (IEP). IDEA allows students to receive services until they graduate high school or, as older high school students, up through age 21.

Once you're in college, the **Americans with Disabilities Act** (the most recent version is the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act or ADAAA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act take over. These civil rights laws mandate that colleges provide access to accommodations to all "otherwise qualified" students and afford them an "equal opportunity" in the institution's programs, activities, and services. But what does that mean in terms of getting or using that talking word processor or other AT devices you used during your time in high school?

Remember: Whether you already own and use a particular AT tool, or if you want your college to provide and pay for it, you may still need to qualify under the law in order to use the technology in college.

How the ADAAA and Section 504 Apply to Accommodations in College

- **Students must self-identify** as having a disability in order to receive accommodations. By law, once you graduate from high school, your parents are no longer allowed to advocate on your behalf, nor is the college required to be proactive in offering accommodations. (Note: The term often used to self-identify an LD is to "disclose.")

- **Students must present documentation of their disability**. Requirements differ among schools, but are likely to include a recent evaluation (no older than 3 years), a current IEP or Section 504 plan, and a Summary of Performance (SOP). This documentation provides an overview of a student's academic achievement and performance at the end of his or her high school career. During your senior year in high school, your IEP team is required to provide you with a Summary of Performance, but it is not obligated to update your evaluation so that it includes the specific types of documentation that are often required by colleges to access disability support services.

- If the college requires a more updated evaluation, <u>find a well-qualified professional</u> who can do the right kind of testing (not more than is needed, not less than is required by the school) at a reasonable cost. Every college has different requirements, so ask them lots of questions and start gathering this information as soon as you can. A letter from a medical provider and a summary of prior test scores might suffice for one college, while an entirely new evaluation that includes scores from adult learning scales might be required by another.

Life Skills Program

Some people with learning disabilities need more intensive services than a community college, university, or vocational-technical school can offer. Life Skills programs are post-secondary educational programs that help young people learn skills needed for independent living.
These programs are provided in a residential setting and often offer training in:

- Life skills
- Workplace literacy
- Social skills development
- Vocational and career exploration and training
- Time management
- Banking and budgeting.

Independent Living Centers are nonprofit, community-based agencies that help people with disabilities achieve and maintain self-sufficient lives within the community. Services offered include advocacy, information and referral, independent living skills training, and peer counseling.

University Programs

College offers a wide range of potential benefits to all students. For some, a two-year or four-year college or university program may lead to a career-entry job. For others, a college degree may lead to graduate school or professional training. Your experiences both in and out of classes can help set a career course for you.

Two-Year Colleges

For many students, two-year colleges provide a chance to prepare for further education, to learn an occupational skill, or to change careers. Students who complete these two-year programs earn an Associate of Arts (AA) degree. You can most often transfer credits earned at a two-year college to a four-year college or university. Some courses of study lead to an Associate of Applied Science (AAS) degree. These are usually occupation-specific degrees (e.g., automotive technician). Some of the AAS degree coursework can be transferred to a four-year college, but some of it cannot.

Community Colleges

These schools offer liberal arts subjects in addition to training in specific occupations, such as hotel management, auto mechanics, marketing, computer programming, or dental assisting. Most community colleges have remedial or developmental courses that can help you upgrade your basic academic skills, if needed.

Private Junior Colleges

Most private junior colleges are small, residential schools that prepare students for transfer to a four-year liberal arts college. Some private junior colleges offer occupational training. Entrance examinations are usually required, however, in many cases, work experience and extracurricular activities are also considered in the admissions process. Students who complete the two-year program earn an AA degree.

Four-Year Colleges

Four-year colleges and undergraduate university programs, including four-year technical schools, vary in tradition, size, admissions criteria, academic standards, course offerings, student population, location and cost. Students who complete a four-year course of study earn a Bachelor of Science (B.S.) or a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) degree.
Most colleges or undergraduate universities will expect you to sample a variety of courses during your first two years. You will then be expected to focus on your major during your last two years. Although requirements for graduation differ widely from school to school, most colleges require that you earn a certain number of credits in English and in foreign languages.

Tips for Successful Living

Adults with learning disabilities can make successful life adjustments and lead fulfilling lives. Here are some words of advice from successful adults with LD who have overcome obstacles and achieved success in school, at work, and in the community.

Building Your Success Story

- Recognize and accept your disability.
- Understand your disability and how it affects your life.
- Understand and value your unique strengths, talents and abilities.
- Learn strategies and techniques to work around your disability.
- Be goal-oriented and persevere in working toward and achieving positive results.
- Learn from failures and take action to change what's not working.
- Build a support network of teachers, family members, friends, counselors and co-workers.

In addition to taking advice from others, many adults with learning disabilities have learned to use assistive technology to help them be more successful and productive in school, at work and at home.

Success doesn't happen overnight. It's a continuous process of understanding your strengths and challenges, and then making adjustments as needed.