

Trouble Learning? Here's What to Do.

Published in Chilliwack Progress, Sept.18, 2005

By Kim A. Dawson

With the beginning of school, both strengths and challenges are again becoming more noticeable. Everybody has strengths and challenges, only some of us are dealt too many cards when it comes to the challenges. One of the challenges young people often have to face is persistent trouble learning. In the language of medicine and psychiatry, this is often called a learning disability.

According to the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, "learning disabilities refer to a number of disorders which may affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding or use of verbal or nonverbal information." Learning disorders often come to light when students' intellectual ability conflicts with their actual level of achievement. "Translation," as educational psychologist Dr. Gerry Koe says, "if your child has average intelligence and is behind in one or more academic areas, then your child may have a learning disability."

Dr. Koe adds, "the earlier a learning disability is detected, the more likely it can be corrected." Signs of learning disorders to watch for include early delays in speech or excessive responses to sounds or words, delays in academic abilities, impulsiveness, difficulties with transitions, social skills problems, and difficulties connecting cause and effect. Attempts to escape from school-work might look like outright defiance, but labelling the young person as "the problem" could be masking an underlying learning disability. Due to the frustration and predictability of repeated failure, low self-esteem and depression might be observed as well. Unfortunately, these same signs can indicate a variety of different mental health issues. Once a learning disability is diagnosed, however, there can be a sense of understanding and relief in discovering the source of these problems. Dr. Koe indicates a diagnosis of a learning disability can not only increase self-esteem and reduce frustration with school-work, but it can also make the young person eligible for modification of exams and enhance the chances of graduation from Grade 12.

Learning disabilities result from impairments or delays in absorbing, remembering, or expressing information of a certain type. They can affect the capacity of the person to communicate. They can also influence the person's capacity in any one of these areas without other areas being affected. The areas that are most noticeable at school are reading, writing, or doing math. Another class of learning disorders are characterized by problems with nonverbal cues. These commonly involve troubles organizing, picking up social cues, or eye-hand coordination problems.

The trouble is that like other psychological disorders, learning disabilities can co-exist with a variety of conditions including attention problems, behavioural and emotional disorders, sensory impairments, or other medical problems. So, it sometimes gets very complicated to separate the specific learning problem from these co-existing problems. That makes it very important that anyone suspecting a learning disability be referred as soon as possible for a psychoeducational assessment.

The psychoeducational assessment usually includes at least two types of psychological tests. These are intelligence tests and achievement tests. Just to reassure readers, a visit to a psychologist does not involve blood tests or injections of any kind!

While school-based testing can be helpful and is sometimes done by special education teachers, a psychologist is the best qualified professional to properly identify a learning disability and to recommend strategies and supports to manage the disability. Based on the assessment results, the psychologist can make recommendations that are tailored to the individual's unique strengths and challenges. These recommendations might include altering the homework environment, allowing more time on assignments, allowing writing to be done on a laptop computer, and other accommodations.

Learning disabilities are life-long and people with them can manage only as a function of sustained effort and support. While everyone is unique and has their own specific array of strengths and

challenges, we need more than the regular curriculum to get our interest in learning. The approach of the person doing the teaching may actually be more important than the curriculum itself. This applies especially to people with learning disorders.

The reasons for learning disabilities vary. They range from genetics and malnutrition to neurological disease and brain injury. They are NOT caused by problems hearing or seeing, social or economic factors, or by cultural or linguistic differences. Nor are they caused by laziness, lack of motivation, ineffective teaching, or poor parenting. These factors might play a role, but they do not cause the learning disorder.

So, if you have a child who is experiencing persistent difficulties learning, it is very important to have a qualified mental health professional do a proper assessment. A school psychologist might be helpful or your family doctor might be able to refer you to a registered psychologist outside the school system. You can also find further information about psychoeducational assessments at

www.missioncounselling.com

Likewise, for adults who are experiencing similar difficulties and are about to attend college or university, it is important to be tested for learning disabilities. If you are diagnosed, you could qualify for special supports and modifications in postsecondary institutions. The institution's student services department is usually a helpful resource.

For further information about learning disabilities, see the website of the Learning Disabilities Association of British Columbia (Fraser South Chapter), at www.ldfs.org. I would also recommend the Ministry of Education website regarding learning disabilities at www.bced.gov.bc.ca/specialed.

Dr. Kim Dawson is a registered psychologist in private practice. His website is www.dawsonpsychologicalservices.com.