

## Learning Difficulties: Information for Teachers

In Australia, it is likely that two to three children in every classroom will experience learning difficulties. Learning difficulties include a wide variety of problems to do with learning new information and skills, and putting them to use.

A learning difficulty is not a problem with a student's intelligence or motivation. Their brains are simply wired differently which affects how they receive and process information. Because of this, students with learning difficulties may need to be taught in ways that are tailored to their unique learning styles, and it is essential for teachers to be able to identify learning difficulties and potential causes. Below are some warning signs to watch out for in the classroom.



Learning Difficulties	Common Issues Noted
<p><b>Dyslexia:</b> Reading Disorder</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May have low reading accuracy, speed and comprehension.</li> <li>• May have an impaired ability to learn basics such as the alphabet, colours, and numbers.</li> <li>• May seem to have difficulty with vision, yet an eye exam doesn't reveal a problem.</li> <li>• May have difficulty recognising letters.</li> <li>• May have difficulty learning letter-sound rules</li> <li>• May lose their place when reading (tracking difficulties).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Dysgraphia:</b> Disorder of written expression</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May struggle with legible writing and letter formation.</li> <li>• May have poor expression when writing and difficulties planning written work.</li> <li>• May use punctuation randomly or not at all.</li> <li>• May write using a mixture of print and cursive, or upper and lower case within a sentence.</li> <li>• May write words that are jumbled and in the incorrect order, or even backwards.</li> <li>• May have difficulty copying from classroom board.</li> <li>• May write using irregular size, shapes or slant of letters.</li> <li>• May not finish off words when writing, or omit words in sentences.</li> <li>• May ignore lines and margins and write with inconsistent spaces between words and letters.</li> <li>• May have a cramped or unusual pencil grip.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Dyscalculia:</b> Mathematics Disorder</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May have an issues remembering math concepts, rules, formulas, and sequences.</li> <li>• May have poor mental math ability.</li> <li>• May have difficulty with abstract concepts such as time and direction.</li> <li>• May have difficulty understanding quantity.</li> <li>• May have difficulties generalises from a worked example the executive approach to solving a specific type of calculation.</li> <li>• Problems applying a stepwise approach to a calculation to a novel calculation.</li> </ul>

### **Other Issues that May Create Learning Problems:**

**Auditory Processing Issues.** Auditory processing issues are caused by difficulties with auditory processing at the level of the brain rather than the ear. That is, whilst basic hearing is normal, children may have difficulty understanding speech in loud or noisy environments, have difficulty following directions and problems discriminating between similar-sounding speech sounds. These issues often create issues with auditory sustained attention and auditory memory. These types of issues will require assessment by an audiologist &/or speech therapist.

**Visual Processing Issues.** Visual processing problems are related to issues making sense of information taken in through the eyes. This may occur at the basic eye level (visual acuity), as well as how the eyes move together (tracking, convergence and divergence), and then how the eyes see information in 3D. If any of these processes are affected this can then create issues with higher level visual processing which can then even more significantly affect learning. Issues may be present with discriminating fine details, identifying a figure from a background, and recognising shapes when they are partially changed (eg. made smaller or parts missing). Visual issues may present academically in the form of issues with tracking when reading, skipping lines, missing words, confusing word order, reading words as visually similar words, and even confusing letter order (eg. who= how). When learning to read children may struggle with remembering sight words and reverse similar letters. They may struggle to write words on the line and space words correctly when writing. Often visual processing issues create issues with visual memory and visual attention, and this will require assessment by a specialist optometrist.

### **What can I do to help?**

- **Assessment-** IQ testing (the standard in Australia being the WISC-IV) and academic achievement testing (the standard usually being the WIAT-II) will be able to diagnose whether your student is achieving to their potential. Assessment will diagnose the presence of any specific learning disabilities (dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia). If issues are identified, it will then be helpful to do a *more comprehensive assessment* to determine why these learning issues have occurred and to identify the core blocks to learning. Testing of memory, attention, visual processing, auditory processing, executive functioning, motor skills, language skills and even potentially psychological factors may be required to help guide appropriate treatment.
- **Treatment** – Tutoring may allow your student to relearn material that was missed in the classroom, however, ultimately the aim of treatment will be to address the core blocks to learning so the student is able to learn effectively in a classroom environment. Treatment may need to be aimed at several areas in order to have your student maximise their potential. It is important to ensure that the person conducting the assessment is able to identify wholistically these blocks to learning, otherwise even if benefits are noted academically, learning may still be an effortful experience for your student.



### **When to refer for assessment:**

If you notice a student exhibiting any significant warning signs above, contact the parents and refer the child to the school counsellor or special needs teacher. For further information and extensive tips and techniques to address specific learning weaknesses in children for the classroom, please visit: [www.psychologist.org.au](http://www.psychologist.org.au).