

Testing Students with Learning Disabilities

A variety of testing methods can be extremely useful in finding out whether children who are experiencing learning difficulties may have one or more learning disabilities. This is an important and valuable role for testing. Another important issue concerns how best to ensure fairness for a learning-disabled student when he or she must take a large-scale standardized test.

Words to the Wise: Not all learning difficulties are learning disabilities! Children develop at different rates, and sometimes what seems to be a learning disability may resolve as the child matures. Importantly, children who are English language learners are sometimes misidentified as having a learning disability, as are children from impoverished backgrounds or with severe problems at home that impact their preparation for school or their behavior.

To be diagnosed as a learning disability, specific criteria must be met. Learning disabilities are generally divided into three main categories:

- developmental speech and language disorders;
- academic skills disorders; and
- certain coordination problems and learning handicaps not covered by the other categories.

It has been estimated that there are nearly 4 million school-age children in the United States with learning disabilities and that at least 20 percent have a type of disorder that leaves them unable to focus their attention. (National Institute of Mental Health, *Learning Disabilities*, 1993). **This is a complex and changing field and each child needs to be recognized as a unique, creative individual.**

The summary below focuses on tests that are used to help diagnose learning disabilities *and* on special accommodations for students with such disabilities as they face large-scale state and other testing.

My daughter is performing poorly in school and I think I need to have her tested for special education. What type of test should my school use to evaluate her?

There are dozens of different types of learning disabilities that range in type, in severity, and in how well they can be diagnosed accurately. In many cases, children may have multiple disabilities that interact in ways that create an almost **child-specific** disorder. Further complicating the assessment of learning

Resources

Helpful Web Sites

CAESL

<http://www.caesl.org/>

CRESST

<http://www.cse.ucla.edu/>

WestEd

<http://www.wested.org/>

Parent Portal at LHS

<http://lhsparent.org>

Greatschools.net

<http://www.greatschools.net/>

National PTA

<http://www.pta.org/>

National Parent Information Network

<http://www.NPIN.org/>

Family Education Network

<http://www.familyeducation.com>

disabilities is that few tests are designed for the express purpose of diagnosing *specific* learning problems. Nonetheless, tests can and do play a very important role in diagnosing learning disabilities, but **they should be only one part of a comprehensive evaluation process**. The *Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act* (IDEA) has specific requirements about the role tests should play in evaluating children for special education. IDEA requires that:

- No single procedure be used as the sole criterion for determining whether a child has a disability and for determining an appropriate educational program.
- Any standardized tests that are given are validated for the specific purpose for which they are used.
- Tests and other evaluation materials are administered in the child's native language unless it is clearly not feasible to do so.
- The evaluation is sufficiently comprehensive to identify all of the child's special education and related services needs. Depending on the disability that may be suspected, your child's school might use a combination of tests, including achievement and aptitude tests. Achievement tests are usually closely related to what is taught in school and ideally measure your child's progress toward the state's academic standards. State and district tests are usually achievement tests. Aptitude tests, such as the current SAT I tests and IQ tests, set out to measure student ability, including reasoning and problem solving. If your child seems to have an attention problem, schools may use teacher and parent rating scales or performance on specific tests related to level of attention. The use of multiple pieces of information can produce more informed decisions and help to identify specific learning disabilities.

Having your child evaluated for possible special education services is a major step for parents. It is highly recommended that you talk with your school psychologist and your child's teacher to determine an appropriate evaluation strategy that uses tests as only one part of the evaluation. **Remember, you have the right to make this request, to have your child tested and evaluated, to advocate for your child, and to have essential and ongoing input to your child's education program.**

My child is in special education and I worry that he will fail these new state tests he has to take. How can I help him?

The *No Child Left Behind Act* holds special education students to the same high standards as regular education students, meaning that by the year 2014, learning-disabled children must perform proficiently or above on all state tests. With more than 13% of public school students receiving services under the *Individual with Disabilities in Education Act*, it is imperative that we find better ways to help learning-disabled children reach these standards.



Make sure that your child's Individual Education Program (IEP) includes instruction and assessment tailored to his specific needs. Your child may qualify for changes to his tests or test administration, often called "accommodations." Depending on state and district testing policies, special education students may be allowed to take a different test, complete fewer questions, dictate their answers, or have more time to complete the test. Often more than one accommodation is helpful, and close monitoring and ongoing modifications may be needed to find an assessment strategy that works best for your child.

Accommodations make sense for many reasons, but their application is complex. Currently, many state testing programs are working on effective ways that learning-disabled students can be accommodated. By providing honest and ample information to your child's IEP team, you can contribute to an assessment and accommodation plan that is as fair and accurate as possible.

My daughter has attention deficit disorder but she also has special talents, including a very good vocabulary. Can I have her evaluated for giftedness?

Yes, you can, as part of a complete evaluation. In fact, giftedness can and does coexist with learning disabilities, and some researchers have developed specific categories that connect giftedness with learning disabilities. Still, evaluating the talents of students with disabilities can be challenging. Many learning-disabled children express themselves less effectively than their non-disabled peers. Additionally, the behavior of some learning-disabled children may hide or obscure their talents. The ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education has created a checklist of characteristics often associated with gifted students who have learning disabilities. They include: high abstract reasoning ability, advanced vocabulary, good mathematical reasoning ability, good problem-finding and problem-solving skills, super-sensitivity, and being imaginative and creative. A comprehensive evaluation by medical professionals **and your input** to your child's IEP team can help identify both your child's talents and special needs.

What You Can Do

- Do not hesitate to express your concerns about a possible learning disability to your child's teacher, school psychologist, or school administrators.
- You have the right to request testing and evaluation and play a prominent role in an education plan. Remember that one of the most important elements of a good individual plan is your understanding of your child and your special ability to provide ongoing input, to suggest changes over time, and to raise questions about any aspects of your child's school experience.
- To find out more about or to suggest specific accommodations for your child in relation to standardized testing, discuss and consult with appropriate school and district personnel.

- Become better informed through reading some of the resources listed below.

Useful Resources

National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). Large collection of material for the public and researchers, including an information booklet on learning disabilities, also on line at <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/ldmenu.cfm>

National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (NICHYD). Excellent source of information for parents of children who may have learning disabilities. NICHYD has a toll-free number to help answer individual questions. 800-695-0285. <http://www.nichcy.org/>

National Center on Educational Outcomes. Information about educational assessments and accommodations with a focus on assessment of students with disabilities. <http://education.umn.edu/nceo/>

ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education. Gathers and disseminates professional literature, information, and resources on the education and development of individuals of all ages who have disabilities and/or who are gifted. 800-328-0272. ericec@cec.sped.org; <http://ericec.org/>

LD On-Line, the official site of the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities has an interactive guide to learning disabilities. It contains numerous resources, including an article on the ABC's of learning disabilities at: http://www.ldonline.org/abcs_info/articles-info.html

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Note: This article was developed by the Public Understanding strand of CAESL to summarize basic information for parents and the general public. It is not a CAESL position statement nor does it necessarily represent the precise views of diverse reviewers. We welcome comments!

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