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Ask Doctor Harold: Learning Disabilities

By Dr. Harold Jules Hoyle, Ph.D.

I was recently at Amoroma and a nice lady came up to me and asked me, "My daughter is having difficulty reading and my school recommended having her tested for a learning disability. What am I getting into?"

There is a lot of information out on the internet about learning disabilities and learning problems, so it is difficult to know where to go and what to believe. I will attempt to provide a framework for understanding the world of learning disabilities.

Technically, learning disabilities did not exist until the law that created Special Education was enacted in the early 70s. A Specific Learning Disability (SLD) is a legal definition. Special education law is in the same historical line as the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education law; it is about legal access to appropriate education. With the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1975, SLD as a legal category was born. Special education law not only covers services for learning disabilities but also speech, gifted and talented, deaf education and many other categories.

But what does IDEA and learning disability mean for my child?

It means the school believes that there is a disconnect between how smart your daughter is and how she is reading or learning to read. She is reading below her potential. Although there are mathematics, processing (memory and sequencing), and writing disorders, in this case the SLD would be a reading disorder. The medical term for a reading disorder is dyslexia and is different than a Specific Learning Disability.

In order for your daughter to get a SLD, a team of people that includes you would need to make that decision at a meeting called an Individual Education Plan meeting. This decision would state that your daughter "qualifies" for special education services. Once this decision is made, the team would come up with educational goals and educational services to meet those goals.

Just as the school is required to provide a ramp and orthopedic help to those students who need it, they are legally responsible to aid your daughter in getting the help she needs to learn the process of reading. Just as we would not give a failing grade to the child in the wheel chair because they couldn't make it around the track, your daughter shouldn't get a failing grade in a content course because of her difficulty in reading.

The good news is that with the right interventions many people with SLDs can learn and go far in education. I have several people with learning disabilities in my classes every year at Santa Clara University who are getting their Masters degree. I have worked with many law students and executives who also qualified for services when younger. The key is getting good interventions and keeping a positive identity around learning.

Here is a list of helpful hints from people that I have worked with; 1) Know your rights and work with the school, 2) Fight for a strength based approach-this means that your child should be doing a lot of what they are good at during the school day. They need to feel successful and be in a well-structured reading program, 3) Understand that school takes a lot more energy for your daughter than for other kids. Imagine trying to thread a needle with a piece of yarn from 8:15 to 2:15 every day. That is how one kid I worked with described reading. 4) Get help! Whether it is friends, family, or professionals, this is a time to reach out and let people help you. If you are thinking about web resources the Council for

Exceptional Children is the leading resource in the field.

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