



Children With Learning Difficulties Need Us In Their Corner

Early diagnosis could change your child's life

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Did you know that children with undiagnosed learning difficulties may develop behavioural problems that can mask the struggles they are experiencing every day at school? These behavioural problems can include angry outbursts, silliness, chatting excessively, or even defiance, but sometimes there is a lot more going on than just a naughty child. Michael was one of these children.

Michael was a bright and creative boy in Grade 4, but his behaviour was becoming more and more of a problem at school. Phone calls home from the school principal were becoming a daily event that his parents dreaded. Although Michael was a pleasure to work with on an individual basis, he had become defiant, rude, and even physically disruptive in the classroom. The other students began to withdraw from Michael because of his angry behaviour, and he had begun to complain about having to go to school where he felt no one liked him.

Michael was struggling with an undiagnosed learning disability that affected his ability to organize and express his thoughts in writing. Although he was extremely bright and able to express himself well when talking about his ideas, as soon as he had to write them down, Michael hit a wall. Spelling and printing were so difficult for him to do that he avoided completing any written assignments. When he did write something, he used simple words that he hoped he could spell, but the result was a very brief, messy, poorly spelled, disorganized piece of work that did not reflect his excellent intelligence or creative ideas. It would be easy to think that Michael was not trying his best, but in fact, he was becoming more and more frustrated and embarrassed about his writing in comparison to what other children were able to do. Eventually, Michael began to refuse to do any written assignments, becoming angry when told he had to, and finally one day he pushed over his desk and chair in frustration.

An undiagnosed problem with writing is one example of a learning problem that can be frustrating and embarrassing for a child who may be very intelligent and capable in every other way, but there are many ways that children can be struggling to learn. Imagine being called on in class to read aloud, but the letters on the page seem to be backwards or in a language you can barely recognize. Stumbling over words in front of their classmates can be so embarrassing that some children resort to distracting the class with inappropriate comments or “bad behaviour” that serves to hide the fact they cannot read. Sometimes it feels better to be scolded for bad behaviour than to be seen as unable to do what everyone else seems to do so easily.

Some learning difficulties can be the result of a problem with working memory, which is a type of memory that helps us to remember several things that we need to do while we work on completing each task. If you ask a child with working memory problems to do three things for you, that child may only remember to do one task or possibly forget all the tasks. This can look like carelessness or even defiance, but sometimes poor memory is at the root of the problem. So, if you have a child that never seems to remember to put the toilet seat down no matter how often you tell him to do it, or comes downstairs bringing only one of the three things you asked her to get, it is possible your child has a problem with working memory.

Understanding your child's behaviour and diagnosing any underlying learning difficulties is something a Psychologist or Psychological Associate can do by conducting a psychoeducational assessment that includes a series of tests, interviews, and questionnaires. Sometimes the school will recommend this kind of assessment for a child and will be able to arrange with the school's psychological consultant to provide the assessment without any cost to the family, but normally each school is only able to arrange a relatively small number of assessments each year due to



budget constraints. If your child is having learning or behaviour problems but the school is unable to provide an assessment, you may want to request a psychoeducational assessment for your child from a registered Psychologist or Psychological Associate in your community. A good assessment by a qualified practitioner will identify your child's learning strengths and weaknesses, any emotional difficulties such as low self-esteem or anxiety and will provide recommendations to help your child feel better and do his or her best at school.

Even though learning difficulties don't usually go away, there are great supports available to help level the academic playing field so that your child has a chance to learn using her strengths and to show what she has learned in a way that works for her. For example, if a child is having problems with expressing ideas in writing but is much better at speaking his or her ideas, a good solution may be to use assistive software on a computer that allows that child to dictate ideas, which the computer then types. This is called voice-to-text software. Or, if we discover during an assessment that a child is a good visual learner but tends to miss a lot of what is said in class due to attention and/or memory problems, information can be presented visually as well as orally so that the child is better able to learn the material. We can also arrange for the teacher to provide notes or for a good note-taker in class to share notes from a lesson, so that a child with attention problems can focus on just listening to the information and not try to take notes at the same time.

A psychoeducational assessment and an individualized approach to learning will also help adults who may have learning difficulties. Many adults have struggled throughout their lives with an undiagnosed learning disability and have often learned to avoid the kinds of tasks that are difficult for them. This may mean avoiding professional training and exams that could have led to a better paying job, or refusing to work with other people so that no one sees how hard it is for that person to read or write. Discovering their learning strengths and challenges and receiving some practical suggestions about how to better cope with these challenges can empower adults of any age to take new chances, such as returning to school as a mature student or applying to take a professional exam in order to qualify for a promotion at work.

The truth is that we all have learning strengths and challenges of one kind or another. The people who are most successful in life have learned to play to their strengths and compensate successfully for their areas of weakness. If you or your child are struggling with practical tasks such as reading, writing, remembering information, maintaining attention, or organizing and planning, it is not too late to discover that learning can be exciting and even enjoyable when you know what strategies work best for you.