

What is a Learning Disability?

Under the American with Disabilities Act (1990), an individual with a disability is a person who:

1. has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities;
2. has a record of such an impairment; or
3. is regarded as having such an impairment.

Learning Disabilities is a general term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual and presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction. Problems in self-regulatory behaviors, perception, and social interaction may exist with learning disabilities, but do not by themselves constitute a learning disability. Even though a learning disability may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (for example, sensory impairment, mental retardation, social and emotional disturbance) or environmental influences (such as cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction, psychogenic factors), it is not a result of those conditions or influences.

(From the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD), 1994.)

The term "specific learning disability" means those children who have a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The term does not include a learning problem, which is primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.

(From the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) reauthorization, 1997.)