



Supporting the Emotional Needs of Children with Learning Disabilities

When children are diagnosed with a learning disability we naturally worry about how it will affect their school performance. What we often don't think about, but should, is how having a learning disability may affect children emotionally.

Emotional Struggles

- Not all children with a learning disability become frustrated, sad, or anxious, but it is quite common for kids to go through at least some period of emotional struggle.
- It isn't easy for children when they see themselves falling behind their friends at school. Even if they pretend they don't notice or care, struggling in school can be a demoralizing experience.
- Here are some signs that the child might be struggling emotionally:
 - Lowered self-esteem, self-confidence
 - Increased anxiety, especially in academic situations (school, homework, tutoring)
 - Increased sadness or irritability
 - Acting out
 - Physical symptoms like headaches or stomach aches
 - Reduced motivation
- Some of the signs like crying or worrying can be obvious, while others like acting out are more frequently misunderstood. Sometimes the child would rather be the "bad" kid rather than the "dumb" kid, or they'd rather be the class clown. They are either trying to take attention away from their academic struggles, or they're trying to have the "I don't care" attitude as a way of saving face.

In addition to getting the child help for a learning issue, parents should think about the emotional needs of the child.

If you see signs that the child is struggling, try to understand what specifically is troubling them. Below are the most common reasons why children with a learning disability might feel bad, and what to do about them.

1. Children with Learning Disabilities think they are “dumb”

This is a particularly big one during the time before a child has received a diagnosis.

Children often notice if they aren't learning at the same pace as the other kids, and can assume it is because they just aren't smart.

Unfortunately, they often continue believing they aren't smart even after they are diagnosed with a learning disability.

What to do:

- Make sure the child understands what a learning disability is.
 - A learning disability results from a difference in the way a child's brain is “wired.”
 - Children with learning disabilities are as smart as or smarter than their peers, but they may have difficulty reading, writing, spelling, memorizing, or organizing information.
 - By definition, a learning disability means that a student is of *at least average* intelligence. In fact, a learning disability is identified when an expert recognizes that a child is not performing up to their natural ability in a particular area.
 - Hearing that a learning disability has nothing to do with intelligence can be very meaningful to kids. Learning disability means you learn differently.
- Think about the messages you are sending.
 - Children are very sensitive to their parents' emotions and if they sense that you are uncomfortable with their diagnosis, or that you think that having a learning disability is a bad thing, they will probably feel the same way.

2. Children with Learning Disabilities feel like they stick out in class

The last thing kids want is to look different from their friends. So when they get pulled out of class for extra help, or called on by the teacher for something they're afraid they can't answer, they may feel embarrassed.

These experiences day after day can damage a child's self-esteem and make them dread going to school or doing school work.

What to do:

- Ask teachers to be sensitive to how children are feeling.
 - Work with the teachers to help them understand how the learning disability is impacting the child emotionally.
 - When a child is anxious about reading, for example, ask teachers to wait for him/her to raise their hand and offer to read instead of calling on the child.
 - If the teacher needs to assess the child's oral reading, it may be better to do it in private.
 - Students and teachers can also work out a subtle signal students can use when they need help or feel themselves getting too frustrated.

- Praise whenever possible.
 - Children who are struggling in school may feel like they are getting mostly negative attention. When teachers and parents make a special effort to give kids positive attention for the things they are doing right – even little things – it can improve their mood and confidence.

3. Children with Learning Disabilities are Worn Out

Unfortunately, learning disabilities in children often means that kids need to work harder than their peers.

This might mean spending more time on homework and doing extra work with a tutor.

Spending so much time on something that is challenging for them can leave kids feeling frustrated and resentful. It can also lead to low motivation in school.

What to do:

- Remember, success leads to success.
 - It is important to set kids up for success – not failure – as much as possible. Teachers, counselors, and parents should set small achievable goals that children can work towards meeting. When a child sees proof that they are making progress, they will be more motivated to continue putting in that extra effort.

- Find their special talent.
 - That is possibly the most important thing you can do for a child who has a learning disability. Find something that the child feels good about doing, and that gives them a sense of accomplishment, and give them time to practice it. As their talent grows, so will their confidence, self-esteem and overall happiness.