

Parents of teenagers with learning disabilities are frequently plagued by the question of how much expectation to place upon their sons and daughters.

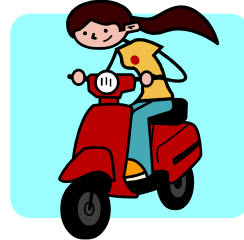
Parents of adolescents with learning disabilities often find themselves in a difficult dilemma: how much is reasonable to expect?

This can be very confusing, especially since learning disabilities are so often “invisible.”

On the one hand, adolescence is an age when teenagers are expected to take on more initiative, responsibility and independence. Typically, this is evident in areas such as schoolwork, hygiene, contact with peers, etc. On the other hand, these parents *know* that despite their chronological age, their sons or daughters are not equipped to take initiative, act responsibly or be independent in a consistent or reliable fashion. Many parents recognize that if their children are left to learn from their “mistakes” or “failures,” what they will likely learn is that they are “failures.” Consequently, parents realize that their children need help in order to have successful experiences and build their confidence. A puzzling factor in all of this is that teenagers with learning disabilities often appear to be and are quite capable in some areas. This may lead people to falsely conclude that when these teenagers don’t act capably or responsibly, this is primarily due to a lack of motivation.

Adding to this predicament are pressures that come from the adolescents themselves

and from society. Although they may not have taken on the responsibilities of adolescence, the teenagers don’t hesitate to ask for the rights and privileges of adolescence. This understandably frustrates their parents.



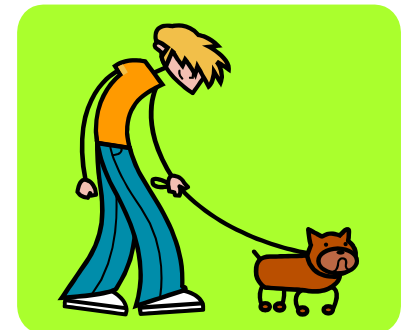
The “invisibility” of learning disabilities may lead other interested and well-intentioned adults (for example, relatives, friends, teachers and other professionals) to caution the parents that if they do not insist on their sons or daughters becoming more responsible for their actions, they will be encouraging dependency.

The message is clear: if the parents continue to “do” for their teenage children, they will not be helping them develop into well-functioning adults.

It is important to place this dilemma in the context of our society, in which independence and autonomy are considered signs of good health. Recently, various groups have criticized this basic belief, and have suggested that this is not found in all cultures and societies. But, if a teenager is not able to assume independence and all that goes with it in our society’s expected way and time frame, the child and his/her parents may face significant negative judgments.

All of this may serve to deflate and shake the confidence of parents. They may feel frustrated, inadequate and guilty when they provide assistance to their teenage sons and daughters; angry with their sons or daughters for not being more independent or autonomous; and confused when they can’t sort out this issue. An additional pressure relates to the parents’ natural desire to decrease their parental responsibilities as their children grow up. This is a developmental stage for parents that typically coincides with the adolescent stage.

Due to the nature of learning disabilities and individual differences, these teenagers often need considerable support to accomplish certain tasks and to reach developmental milestones. Their parents can, with good will, feel free to lend a hand. This must be coupled with encouragement and expectations, which contribute to the teenager assuming greater responsibility. This is a difficult, delicate and worthwhile balance to determine.





Integra, founded in 1967 by parents and professionals, is an accredited Children's Mental Health Centre dedicated to helping children and adolescents who experience social, emotional and behavioural problems related to their learning disabilities. We are a charitable organization administered by a Board of Directors comprised of dedicated volunteers from the community.

Integra has an experienced and multidisciplinary professional staff that is dedicated to creating and implementing a range of programs. Integra serves as a centre for research, practicum placement and continuing education.

Integra is committed to the promotion of a community-wide understanding of the mental health needs of children and adolescents who have learning disabilities, and to improving community-based services for them and their families. A range of clinical services is provided by Integra, as well as related activities in research and evaluation, and in training, consultation, collaboration and advocacy.



Improving the Lives of Children &
Youth with Learning Disabilities

Reproduction of this TIP was made possible through a grant from The Ontario Trillium Foundation:



This Tip article is just one of a series of Tips written by Integra staff. To view all the Tips, please visit our website at:

www.integra.on.ca

This article first appeared in *Among Friends*, Integra's twice yearly newsletter publication

© 1998.



TIPS FOR PARENTS

Expectations: A Delicate Balance

Faye Mishna, Ph.D., C.S.W.

*Improving the Lives of Children & Youth
with Learning Disabilities*
25 Imperial St., Toronto, ON M5P 1B9

T: 416-486-8055
E: info@integra.on.ca
W: www.integra.on.ca