

As parents and teachers know, learning disabilities affect far more than schoolwork. They influence feelings, behaviour, and everyday life skills. Although learning disability is often known as the “invisible” disability, associated problems can be all too visible and distressing. Problems can be mistakenly attributed to such negative character traits as laziness, unwillingness to cooperate, “bad” attitude, or stubbornness. Understanding how learning disabilities can affect behaviour can help parents and teachers to deal with problems more effectively. A “view from within” is needed, an understanding of how a particular aspect of a learning disability affects the thoughts, feelings and actions of the person who has it. Start by putting aside your own worries and frustration and try to put yourself in the child or youth’s shoes. What may seem an everyday accomplishment for most children may require enormous effort for the child with a learning disability.

ANXIETY

Anxiety is a common companion for children and youth with learning disabilities. These children and youth often hide feelings of worry from others and even from themselves. They may say no to anything new or unpredictable; they may ask endless questions, whine a lot, or blame others. They may get angry easily or even have tantrums when faced with difficulties. Inside they may be feeling confused and terrified. Because of their learning disability, they

may have difficulty understanding their world. Anxious children and youth may cope with uncertainty and fear by trying to control everything and everyone. When this fails, they may become defiant or withdrawn. They may be unable to explain how they feel, perhaps because they cannot find the words, or are too embarrassed. It can be helpful for parents and teachers to realize that the core of the problem is anxiety—not anger or being “spoiled.” With this awareness, parents can then give the reassurance that will help children better respond to a firm approach.

SELF CONTROL

Problems with self-control frequently accompany learning disabilities. Children and youth may have trouble controlling anger, excitement, sadness, sometimes anxiety and, often, attention. They speak and act without thinking and have difficulty staying on task. They have trouble waiting or working for a reward in the future. They may have outbursts of anger or silliness. These children may appear as if they are not making an effort to behave or are deliberately making “bad choices” or do not care about consequences. On the inside, for children and youth with self-control problems, it may feel like events are continually “getting away” on them. They find themselves doing things before they have time to think, carried away by whatever bothers them or catches their interest at the moment. They often have good intentions but still continually seem to be in trouble.

When asked, these children and youth know what they should have done, and usually cannot explain why they did not do it. They often do not know why they do things except to report a general feeling of getting carried away. Problems with self-control can be intricately related to problems with finding the words to describe their thoughts and feelings. Or they may not be able to explain because they have been in trouble so often and feel so ashamed that it is too painful to think about, let alone talk about.

Most of all, these children and youth need compassion. They need adults to understand that self-control is very challenging for them. All children need to be given credit for trying, for having good intentions, and for partial success. These children cannot succeed without that special help. Children and youth with self control problems also need reminders, firmness, consistency, clear rules, fair consequences, and time-outs when they get carried away. They need help and practice in talking themselves through difficult situations. They need guidance to break down situations into steps that allow them to anticipate problem situations, and think through how to deal with them. This sort of help fosters more thinking ahead and less getting carried away.

These children and youth are challenging to raise and to teach. Their parents and teachers deserve the support and advice that will make success possible.

LANGUAGE

Children with disabilities in the area of receptive language often misunderstand what is said to them. Some children are aware of a sense of confusion and misunderstanding. In this case, they can ask for clarification. But others are not even aware of their lack of understanding. They tend to feel intentionally misled, insulted, or even lied to. While it can be tricky for parents and teachers to untangle the webs of confusion and hurt feelings, awareness that a disability in receptive language is at the base of the problem can help. Then, using an accepting tone of voice, explaining situations with brief but simple language suited to the child’s abilities is usually helpful.

Expressive language disabilities mean that children have difficulty expressing themselves clearly and politely. When angry or upset, they have difficulty explaining. They may frequently resort to simple statements such as “That’s stupid” or “You’re stupid”. Rather than taking such statements at face value, these children need patience and support to explain what they mean. It is best to avoid complicated questions that require long answers. Those questions usually receive “I don’t know” answers that seem like the child is disinterested.

He or she may be struggling desperately to find words. It can help to ask specific—rather than open-ended—questions, perhaps containing guesses about what the child is trying to say. It is

important to give the child time to organize his or her ideas before responding.

MEMORY

Children with memory problems can appear to be trying to avoid responsibility. They may constantly forget where they left things or when they should bring them home or to school, forget appointments, chores, and assignments and are generally disorganized. This behaviour may originate in a significant memory problem. These children need help to develop strategies to remind themselves of important tasks. Examples are using a watch with an alarm, posting reminder notes in strategic places, and using an agenda. Of course praise for efforts to use these strategies is essential, as well as reminders and sympathetic understanding that it will take time to *remember* to use the strategies.

ASKING FOR HELP

A common complaint of parents and teachers is that children with learning disabilities do not ask for help even though they clearly need it. They will flounder unsuccessfully even in the presence of someone who could help. These children are often too embarrassed to ask for help. They hate to have peers witness their failure to manage independently. Or they may feel too hopeless about themselves to ask.

They may suffer from “learned helplessness”: an assumption that they will be unable to succeed; an expectation of failure if they try to operate independently. Another concern is the child who is struggling but cannot figure out how to ask for help. This child feels confused, overwhelmed, and helpless. He or she does not know the questions that could bring the necessary help. In all these situations, children need understanding, patience, lots of praise and encouragement, and above all protection from shame and embarrassment. 📌

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 © 2000.



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.



TIPS FOR PARENTS

The View From Within: Understanding Learning Disabilities And Behaviour Management

Margaret Amerongen, M.S.W., R.S.W.

*Serving Children and Adolescents with
Learning Disabilities*

25 Imperial St., Toronto, ON M5P 1B9

T: 416-486-8055

E: info@integra.on.ca

W: www.integra.on.ca