

An increasing number of children and youth seeking Integra's services have learning profiles with the constellation of traits called "nonverbal learning disability" (NLD). This is a complex disorder, often not well understood by caregivers and educators. As with other learning disabilities, problems in behaviour and lifeskills associated with nonverbal learning disabilities are often mistakenly attributed to negative character traits such as laziness, stubbornness, and uncooperativeness. Grasping "the view from within" and putting ourselves in the shoes of children and youth with learning disabilities is critical in order to effectively understand and help them.

Children with NLD often have relatively well-developed vocabulary and rote memory for facts, but struggle in one or more of the following areas:

- 🕒 visual-spatial skills: poor understanding of what is taken in visually, poor perception of the relative positions of objects in space;
- 🕒 organizational skills: how things fit together in patterns, in time, and in space; e.g. breaking tasks down into component parts and combining parts to make the whole;
- 🕒 motor skills: physical awkwardness, writing problems;
- 🕒 social and emotional problems due to difficulty processing complex or novel information. These children have trouble learning the meaning of the actions, the nonverbal behaviour, and the emotions of others. They struggle with adjusting to novelty or transitions. All of this leads to problems in social judgment and social interaction.

Children with NLD are often labeled as behaviour problems because it is not recognized that their problems are neurological in origin.

Everyday tasks can be confusing and overwhelming for children with NLD. These can include:

- 🕒 finding their way around a school or a neighbourhood

- 🕒 remembering where they put things or how to find them; tidying a room, notebook or knapsack
- 🕒 coping with the complexity of a group of children playing: what is fair, what is socially acceptable to say or do, how to appropriately enter and continue a conversation
- 🕒 adjusting to any alteration in routine or grasping a change in rules or method of completing tasks

Children with NLD often have "meltdowns" or detach themselves by "spacing out" because they are overloaded with the sheer effort of navigating situations that other children learn to cope with automatically. For example, the child may avoid or react angrily to any sort of novelty because he or she is not able to quickly and accurately understand the new situation. Children with NLD often talk incessantly. This may be because they rely heavily on their well-developed language skills to interact with others and to cope with ever-present confusion and anxiety. Social problems frequently occur because the child with NLD does not understand the idea of "personal space", or the nonverbal signals that other people use to convey irritation, anxiety, etc. Often the child does not understand the give and take of play and conversation. He or she may be unaware that the listener is bored. The child with NLD may try to control play in order to cope with his or her uncertainty and anxiety. The child with NLD frequently but unintentionally makes inappropriate comments and then is bewildered when others become upset.

What caregivers and teachers can do:

1. Learn as much as they can about NLD and how it specifically affects their own child. This will help them to understand the meaning of the child's behaviour and to set realistic expectations for him or her. This knowledge will help the caregiver to attain "the view from within" and put themselves in the child's shoes in order to compassionately and effectively help. Lack of knowledge about NLD can lead to unrealistic demands, expectations and frequent criticism. The heartbreaking result can be serious erosion in the child's self esteem and in the caregiver's self-confidence.

2. Recognize that uncooperative behaviour may be the result of feeling confused, anxious and overwhelmed.
3. Give the child verbal direction and instruction. Use the child's verbal strengths to help him learn from explicit instruction what other children learn implicitly. Explicitly teach her such details as: what is expected in different social, family, and school situations; how others feel, how to organize and carry out tasks, etc. It has been wryly noted (see Sue Thompson's book) that parents may find themselves saying of their child with NLD, "I shouldn't have to tell you everything!" The truth is that the child with NLD does need to be taught much of what other children learn automatically – they need to be taught, however, with kindness and patience.
4. Manage the environment. Children with NLD need predictable schedules as much as possible. They need preparation for changes in routines and to be given notice that they are about to be asked to make a transition in activities. They need advance planning and instruction about unfamiliar tasks and situations.

This Tip article can provide only the briefest of introductions to NLD and suggestions for coping. Our information is drawn from the following books:

[Nonverbal Learning Disorders at Home](#) by Pamela Tanguay

[The Source for Nonverbal Learning Disorders](#) by Sue Thompson

[Helping a Child with Nonverbal Learning Disorder or Asperger's Syndrome](#) by Kathryn Stewart

All of these books are available at local bookstores.



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.

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TIPS for Parents

The View from Within: Understanding Nonverbal Learning Disabilities

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

*Improving the Lives of Children & Youth
with Learning Disabilities*

25 Imperial Street, Toronto, Ontario M5P 1B9
Tel: (416)486-8055, E-mail: info@integra.on.ca
www.integra.on.ca