

# 50 Questions About LD

An E-Book for Parents of Children with Learning Disabilities

Prepared by the National Center for Learning Disabilities  
in Response to Questions from the NCLD Online Community



# Acknowledgments

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## Dealing with Labels

The issue of “labels” is one that evokes strong feelings, and rightly so. Some folks just want them to go away. Others work hard to get them for their children as a first step to securing needed services and supports. Others are on the fence and are selective about when and to whom they choose to disclose a learning disability or other disorders that impact learning, attention, or behavior. The questions posed to our experts offer insight into these issues as well as other related topics such as when to request an evaluation, how to deal with worries about stigma, and using the word “difference” rather than “disability.”



**Q.** *I really don't like using the word "disability" and would prefer to use the word "difference" to describe my child? Is that okay?*

**A.** You should use whatever term you feel most comfortable with! The "d" word can be really scary to some parents — you want your child to feel valued, protected, and in no way inferior to anyone else. But remember: there is no shame in having a learning disability. At NCLD, **we use the term "learning disability"** because LD is more than just a difference or preference. LD is not transient (it doesn't come and go) or the result of inadequate instruction, low intelligence, or laziness. In fact, a growing body of research shows that LD is the result of some particular ways that the brain is organized and how it works. We also use the term because individuals with disabilities have **rights and entitlements under federal law** that those with "differences" or "preferences" do not.

Whatever term you choose to use, remember: LD is what your child has, not who they are. While LD often means that your child has to work harder to demonstrate their intelligence and creativity, it in no way diminishes his or her ability to be **successful**.

**Q.** *How important is it for my child to have a specific label such as "dyslexia?" Is a classification of "LD" enough?*

**A.** Labels can be confusing — and not just for parents! Even in the world of LD professionals, there are different opinions on when a term like "dyslexia" should be used. What's much more important than a specific label is being able to describe your child's specific learning needs:

- What exactly does your child struggle with?
- Where does his understanding break down?
- In what areas does he need targeted, intensive instruction to be successful in school?

Work with your child's teachers and other professionals to answer these questions. Whether services are provided through an **IEP**, a **504 plan**, or another type of intervention strategy (for example, tiered services in an **RTI** framework) the outcome should be the same: the label (which could change over time) should result in decisions that lead to high-quality services and supports.

**Q.** *My 2nd grader is really struggling in school, but I'm hesitant to have him tested for learning disabilities. I don't want him to face the stigma of having the "LD" label. What should I do?*

**A.** If your son was having trouble breathing, you wouldn't hesitate to find out whether he had asthma or some other medical condition, right? And if he was squinting while watching TV or reading and having trouble tracking a ball thrown at him, you wouldn't be reluctant to have his eyes checked by a specialist, right? Using an inhaler or wearing glasses can carry a "stigma" the same way that struggling to read, write, and do math can impact how people perceive someone's competence to achieve, compete, and excel at different school-related tasks.

Think about "testing" as "finding out" and not as a way to label or brand your son. The **LD label** (if deemed appropriate after testing, careful discussion, and consensus between you and school personnel) is used solely to formally acknowledge the need to provide special types of services and supports for your son in school and is nothing to be ashamed of! **Any stigma attached to the label is a consequence of misinformation.** The "stigma" can be minimized (or eliminated) by open and honest conversations about the things he does well, the areas in which he needs assistance, and a shared commitment to ensuring that he has plenty of opportunities to shine. And be sure to include your son in these conversations!

### **Video: I Think My Child Has a Learning Disability...Now What?**

**Q.** *I dread family visits because some relatives don't understand dyslexia and they blame me for my daughter's problems in school. I want my extended family to be supportive, and my daughter needs it, too. What do I do?*

**A.** It can be beyond frustrating to encounter family members or friends who make comments that make you feel sad, mad, or unraveled. What to do? In a word, be yourself! You know that your daughter's problems are real, that a learning disability like dyslexia doesn't happen just in school, and that learning disabilities are not cause for blame or shame.

Share with these relatives the kinds of struggles and successes your daughter has with learning, and in a careful and supportive way, help them to understand her challenges first hand. For example, have them play a word game like Bananagrams, Boggle, or Scrabble with her so they can see how she struggles with letter and sounds. Play a card game and allow her to use a calculator to tally sums so they can see that she's smart but needs accommodations to succeed (or in this case, compete).

Sharing some resources about the basics of LD might also help, for example, **Learning Disabilities Basics** or **Learning Disabilities: What They Are, and What They Are Not**. Dr. Betty Osman, a psychologist specializing in children and adults with LD, has a number of easy-to-read books that

address family issues. (For example, [Learning Disabilities and ADHD: A Family Guide to Living and Learning Together](#).)

Consider leaving one out on the coffee table in the living room when family comes to visit? Or, perhaps give them as a not-so-subtle holiday gift?

**Video: The Emotional Journey of a Child with LD**

## Warning Signs and Evaluation

There is no question that earlier is better when it comes to discovering whether a child has a learning disability. But the process of recognizing and differentiating between “struggle,” “delay,” and “disorder” is not easy, and there are many ways to approach the question of whether a child is “at risk” for having LD at different ages and stages in their journey through school. We engaged experts to respond to questions about: screening, testing, and comprehensive evaluation; how to make decisions when children have some very specific areas of weakness (and demonstrate grade-level skills and even accelerated learning in others); and what do when disagreements arise between parents and school personnel about eligibility for services and supports.



**Q.** *I saw the LD Checklist on LD.org and I think my child might have a learning disability. What are the most important steps I should take to see whether my child has a learning disability? She's really struggling in school.*

**A.** First, learn about LD and other struggles with learning and behavior. Ask questions, speak to school personnel, and visit [LD.org](https://www.ld.org), especially the [section for parents in the process of LD identification](#). Being well informed will give you confidence when partnering with school staff to get your child the help she needs to learn. Don't hesitate to reach out to additional professionals or other parents for extra assistance.

It can be stressful to confront the possibility that your child might have LD and what it might mean for your child's education and future. But don't let your emotions delay the discovery process. There is plenty of time to [work through your feelings about LD](#), and waiting only delays the opportunity to pinpoint the nature of the problem and put services and supports in place.

Perhaps most importantly, trust your instincts! No one is likely to have better intuition about your child's underlying struggle than you. If you find that your concerns about your child are ignored or played down by school personnel or her pediatrician, learn about LD and how to be an effective [advocate](#).

**Video: Steps Parents Should Take Once Their Child Is Identified with a Learning Disability**

**Q.** *My child is in preschool. She's having fun, but I'm not sure she's learning. Is she at risk for LD? What are the warning signs?*

**A.** Preschool is an exciting time when kids make great learning leaps — some very visible, others not as much. While every child develops at his or her own pace, but **there are some important “red flags” you can be aware of as you observe your child.**

Most children exhibit one or more of these “at-risk” behaviors from time to time. However, if several of these behaviors persist over time, you should seek professional advice. Early intervention makes a big difference for struggling learners, so if you are concerned about your child, don't hesitate to take action.

You should definitely take a look at the [Early Learning Observation and Rating Scale](#), a free tool for parents and educators to gather and share information about preschool children with specific attention to characteristics that might be early signs of LD. You'll find additional information and resources to help you with your child's preschool journey at NCLD's [Get Ready to Read](#) website.

**Q.** *According to different checklists that I've seen, I think my preschooler may be a little behind developmentally. How do I know if he's going to be ready for kindergarten?*

**A.** Child development is not a connect-the-dots kind of experience. During these early years, most children make their way down a series of paths (in areas such as early literacy, oral and receptive language, math, fine and gross motor, and attention) that converge when they are just about ready to head off to preschool. The skills that they have acquired have followed a more or less predictable course, and parents and teachers are optimistic about their continued and steady progress. And we've all met youngsters who don't quite follow this predictable path.

“Readiness for kindergarten” means lots of different things, and knowing your child’s specific areas of interest, strength, and relative weakness across a number of key domains will help you answer your question. NCLD’s [Pre-K to Grade 2](#) website section offers a selection of easy-to-read information that could be helpful to you in knowing whether your son is “ready” for school. And be sure to take a look at our [Get Ready to Read](#) website. It has many resources for parents like you, including a free [Transitioning to Kindergarten Toolkit](#) and an [Early Learning and Observation Rating Scale](#).

**Q.** *Is my son having problems with reading because he's developing more slowly or because he has a learning disability? Will the school (that just implemented RTI in the early grades) test him for dyslexia? He's already 8 years old.*

**A.** Each child “develops” at his or her own pace. Any “lag” in development is best addressed with specific criteria in mind. For example: What are the specific reading-related tasks that appear to be barriers to your son’s success? Can he recognize common (sight) words, sound out new words, blend letter sounds, and understand word meanings (with and without context cues)?

Your son’s teacher should be able to shed light on your concerns from **screening data** — the hallmark of an effective Response to Intervention program — that is readily available, both for all the students in your son’s class and on targeted efforts to address your son’s specific challenges in the area of reading.

The school might recommend testing for a learning disability in reading (also known as dyslexia), but know that you too can request (do it in writing!) that an evaluation be conducted at any time. (See NCLD’s [Parent Guide to IDEA](#) for an easy-to-understand breakdown of your rights and how to work in partnership with school personnel.) But **don’t rush into testing!** Sometimes a change in classroom instruction or consultation with specialized school staff will be enough to set your son on a path to success.

**Q.** *My daughter has always been okay in math, but now that she's in high school she's really struggling. Do you think she may have developed a math disability?*

**A.** If your daughter does have a learning disability in math — called “**dyscalculia**” — it’s not likely that it just appeared when she entered high school. She may have experienced gaps in math knowledge and procedures along the way and her more advanced classes are placing demands on her that presume she has the skills and understanding needed to succeed.

Why is she first struggling now? Perhaps she learned math basics but doesn’t have the “big picture” of how math works in order to do well in more advanced classes. She may be struggling with the increased demands of multi-step problems and is having trouble retrieving, selecting, and/or applying procedures that she has learned. She may need more opportunities to practice and need targeted teacher feedback. And, there is always the issue of how she feels about herself as a math learner and the impact it has on her willingness to seek clarification, spend extra time, and take risks.

For helpful information about math learning and math disabilities take a look at the **dyscalculia resources** on LD.org.

**Video: What Is Dyscalculia?**

**Q.** *My daughter is in junior high. She's always been a slow reader, but now she's getting even further behind with her schoolwork. Could she have a learning disability like dyslexia?*

**A.** Yes, your daughter could have **dyslexia**, but being a “**slow reader**” is not, by itself, reason to suspect a disability. In junior high the amount of required reading increases dramatically. If she’s a slow reader, this increase in volume will certainly add to her frustration. An **evaluation** for a learning disability is certainly an option, but consider these steps first:

- Ask your daughter what specific aspects of reading present the greatest challenges. If all she needs is more time for reading, have her ask teachers for assigned reading lists in advance of their due dates and help her schedule protected homework time so she is not overburdened with too much reading all at once.
- Investigate **assistive technologies** that could help her overcome her particular challenges. Tools like optical scanning software (e.g., Kurzweil 3000) are available to convert print into speech. This is a great option for some students who enjoy (and can benefit from) listening (and maybe following along and taking notes) rather than having to read many pages of narrative themselves.

- An ever-growing library of printed material is available in digitized formats, meaning that they can be downloaded from the web and listened to on a computer, MP4 player, mobile device, etc. Check out [Bookshare](#) and [Learning Ally](#) as options.

If a learning disability in reading (dyslexia) is the underlying problem, it could be very helpful to have your daughter work with a reading or learning disabilities specialist in school or privately during after school hours.

**Q.** *I don't agree with the school's evaluation of my son. They say he doesn't have a learning disability, but I know something isn't right. Should I be worried?*

**A.** When the school **conducted his evaluation**, what did they discover and what do they plan to do? The point is not necessarily whether your son qualifies for special education services, but rather, what is the school prepared to do to ensure that he has a successful school experience? Will teachers meet on a regular basis to review his progress? Will they teach him strategies for studying for exams, provide edits to draft papers, let him edit and resubmit work before assigning a final grade?

These are examples of actions that the school can implement with or without special education classification. If you and school personnel are not able to negotiate these types of

accommodations and supports on an informal basis, you can (and should) request (in writing) a formal committee meeting to discuss the possible benefits of an independent evaluation for your son. (Note: In most cases, parents must bear the burden of this expense, so working with school personnel to pinpoint strategies to address your child's needs is always the best approach.) Also explore the option of having your son receive support via a **504 plan**.

For a detailed explanation of your child's rights, see NCLD's [Parent Guide to IDEA](#). And for help making this decision, use our free online [Resource Locator](#) to find a [Parent Training and Information Center](#) or other organization in your area that can offer help.

**Video: How Do I Request an Evaluation?**

## RTI and School Interaction

The questions and answers in this chapter shed light on the nature of Response to Intervention (RTI) and how these types of multi-tiered systems of instruction and support interface with special education and related services. Experts also comment on important issues such as school choice and grade retention as they relate to students with learning disabilities.



**Q.** *My school plans to use something called “response to intervention” with my 1st grader. Why won’t they just test her for a learning disability and get her the help she needs ASAP?*

**A.** You’re lucky the school follows the **Response-to-Intervention (RTI) approach!** Jumping from “struggle” to “testing” is not the best way to make sure your child will get the help he needs. RTI (when implemented well) delivers high-quality instruction to all students, makes adjustments for those who continue to struggle, and gathers critical information so that testing, if needed, can pinpoint the specific nature of a child’s problem. Special education “testing” and the determination of whether a child is eligible for special education services is made easier through RTI activities. Take a look at **RTI and the Special Education Evaluation and Eligibility Process** for more information about how RTI works and when (and how) to requested testing.

**Video: What Is Response to Intervention (RTI)?**

**Q.** *People are telling me not to request special education testing (which I feel my child needs) because the school is using an RTI approach. Is testing the right decision or is RTI a better approach?*

**A.** You don’t have to choose between RTI or testing — it could be both. If your child’s school is implementing an **RTI**

**program**, it means that they will make an effort to understand what has been working for your son in terms of instruction in the general curriculum and what, if any, changes might be implemented to enhance his progress. If “what’s not right” ends up to have something to do with classroom instruction, then the RTI approach will help to remedy it. If, however, your son continues to experience challenges, even when tier one (whole class), tier two (small group or more targeted) and tier three (more individualized) types of instruction and intervention are offered, the “proof” of your son qualifying for special education support services will be ready and waiting! At that point, any **additional “testing” can be done to determine eligibility for special education (or other) services**, pinpoint the specific types of help he needs to succeed, and inform how best to monitor his ongoing progress.

**Q.** *My child’s elementary school did not have an RTI program but his junior/senior high school does. He’s been receiving special education help since 3rd grade. I’ve done some research into RTI, and it seems to be used more for younger kids. Can it help older kids too? As a parent, what should I expect as he moves to a school that uses RTI? Should I be worried about him getting the services he needs?*

**A.** Yes, effective and well-implemented RTI practices can help students of all ages, and no, don’t be worried — be diligent! There are growing numbers of middle and senior

high school programs that are successfully using RTI approaches to address the needs of all students, including those who struggle with learning. Visit the [RTI Action Network](#) website to learn more about these programs, view videos of RTI practices in action, and listen to online chats with principals, researcher professionals and practitioners. You should also check out our [Parent Guide to RTI](#) for more on what to expect as your child enters a school that uses an RTI approach.

**Q.** *My daughter attends our neighborhood elementary school, and I'm not satisfied with it. I know I have the option to send her to another school in the district, or a charter school or private school, but I don't know how to choose. She has LD and I know I need to consider that as I look at schools. How can I pick the best school for her?*

**A.** Parents have more choices than ever when it comes to picking a school for their child, and as the parent of a child with LD, you have **additional factors and options to consider**. Start out by making a list of the important features you want in a school. Consider factors related to academics and your child's LD-related needs, school environment and culture, as well as practical matters like finances and transportation.

Use that list as you explore **the school options available to you**. If you are considering public schools, go online and search for individual school and district "report cards." Also

look for information about how a school monitors student progress, numbers of students with disabilities, teacher qualifications, and more. But don't limit your quest for information to online research — it's very important for you (and your daughter!) to visit a prospective school. For a worksheet of questions to ask and things to look for during a school visit, download our [Visiting A School Worksheet: What to Ask, What to Look For](#).

**Q.** *My daughter is failing third grade and the school is talking about holding her back. She might have a learning disability — I don't know for sure — but will having her repeat a grade really help?*

**A.** Having a child repeat a grade is a very serious decision, with huge (and unfortunately, not always positive) consequences, so make sure you really understand the school's reasons for this recommendation and how this action will improve your daughter's school experience. **Grade retention** by itself does not guarantee anything other than the child being a year older and still having to face the same or similar academic challenges as the year before. Research about grade retention is very clear that:

- Children who were retained before kindergarten were 66% more likely to receive negative feedback from teachers during their later school years, when compared to their non-retained peers.

- When students who were retained reach adolescence, they may experience some behavioral difficulties, perhaps stemming from their being older than their peers.
- Students who are more than a year older than their classmates are more likely to drop out of high school than their age matched peers.

If the school is recommending that your daughter repeat a grade, make sure that their decision is based on a very targeted plan to provide instruction and support for her that will both close the learning gap and address the emotional and behavioral consequences of being “left back.”

**Q.** *We had an official meeting at school and it confirmed that my 7-year-old daughter has a learning disability. Why does it take so long to get help? I've been pushing for testing since she was in preschool. I'm thankful she's now getting the resources she needs, but I'm afraid of it being too late. Is it?*

**A.** It is not (repeat, *not*) too late for your daughter to receive the specialized types of instruction and support she needs (and to which she is entitled) to catch up with her peers and to succeed in school. Even students who are identified at a much older age than your daughter can be very successful. Your job is to be an **active partner with school personnel**, making sure that the goals identified on her IEP are well chosen, that she will receive the precise types of help that she needs in a targeted

and timely fashion, and that frequent assessments of her progress are made to ensure that she makes steady progress.

Your daughter is lucky to have a mom who is so tuned in to her needs. Don't stop asking questions of school personnel and make sure that everyone maintains high expectations for achievement. If you know of other parents who are “pushing for testing” and not getting help from the school, advise them to visit LD.org, where they can learn how to **request an initial evaluation at any time**. (Once a formal request has been made in writing, the school must evaluate the child, according to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.)

## IEPs and Monitoring Progress

In this section, our experts reinforce the critical role that parents play in the Individualized Educational Program (IEP) process. They acknowledge how stressful it can be for parents (“terrified” is how one parent described her feelings as she walked into her first IEP meeting of the year) and offer recommendations about how parents can feel secure in their role as partners in planning for school success. They also comment on what parents might do if children are not on an expected trajectory toward improvement.

**Video: What Is an IEP?**



**Q.** *In what specific ways will my child's school monitor his progress?*

**A.** Progress monitoring is extremely important. It helps to determine if the interventions being provided to your child are working. It also allows you and his teachers to determine much sooner whether your child is at risk for not meeting grade-level targets. And it allows teachers to more closely match instruction and support to your child's needs, based on his response to the interventions.

If your child shows limited or slow progress, then the school must further explore what changes to the interventions must be made to ensure your child is making good progress. For example, the teacher might change the type of intervention (or method) being used, the amount of instructional time, the grouping arrangement (e.g., individual instruction versus small-group instruction), or some other aspect of teaching.

**Progress monitoring also supports students with LD themselves:** it can provide motivation to learn and encouragement to persevere because students can see their own progress.

If you have concerns about your child's progress, you may also want to consider the approach described in this article: **[A Parent's Guide to Progress Monitoring at Home.](#)**

**Q.** *How involved should a parent be in the implementation of their child's IEP? I'm not sure what my role is.*

**A.** Be as involved as possible! Because you know your child the best, you are a critical member of the IEP team. You play a central role in all stages of your child's educational process — assessment, identification, instruction, intervention, and progress monitoring.

- Don't be intimidated by the IEP team process. As the parent, you know your child better than anyone else!
- Be active and engaged.**
- Assist with planning and problem solving.
- Be organized and have a system to help you keep track of your observations, teacher reports, assessment data, team discussions, recommendations, and evidence of progress. Ask for help setting up a system that works for you.
- Make sure you read the IEP** thoroughly before you sign off on it. (And remember, you can always make changes to this plan.)
- Ask questions. You play a different role than the teacher, but one that is no less important. By helping to develop your child's IEP objectives, you will know what is being done in school to accelerate your child's progress and can interact with your child at home in ways that extend and enhance the targeted support being provided in school.

## Video: How Involved Should Parents Be When It Comes to Their Child's IEP?

**Q.** *My daughter's first IEP meeting is coming up, and I'm terrified! How do I know she'll get what she needs?*

**A.** Let's drop the "ed" from the word "terrified" and adding the letter "c." It's really "terrific" that you're worrying out loud about whether your daughter will receive the services and supports she needs to be successful!

**Voicing your concerns** is exactly what you need to be doing as you enter into a new kind of partnership with school personnel. Together, you'll identify the types of specialized instruction, accommodations, and if needed, modifications in curriculum that will enable your daughter to get back on track with her peers, and to maintain steady and ongoing progress. Think of the IEP meeting as an opportunity to do strategic planning with a team of people who are counting on you to help out at home and who will now assume a more formal responsibility to address her needs. It's really important that you ask questions, share impressions, and insist that clear and measurable goals, outcomes, and timelines be included on the IEP — it will go a long way in ensuring that your daughter will not "slip between the cracks."

Look through **NCLD's IEP & 504 Plan section** for more detailed information and videos about IEPs. You'll especially

want to review the chapter in our IDEA Parent Guide, **Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) - Developing Your Child's Education Plan.**

**Q.** *My 7th grader has had an IEP since 1st grade. Now that he's in middle school, he no longer seems to be improving. What should I do?*

**A.** Going from one grade to the next can be difficult for students with LD, and middle school can be especially challenging due to increasing expectations for achievement and the social/emotional turmoil that's often part of the early adolescent years. Given your son's recent transition, it's good that you're wondering whether adjustments need to be made to the IEP. Here are some suggestions:

- Reach out to your son's teachers, share your concerns, and gather information on what might be causing this slow-down in his progress. Then share what you've learned with the IEP team.
- The school is required by law to review and revise (as needed) an IEP at least once each year. If you think the current version of your son's IEP isn't working, you have the right to call an IEP meeting. (Read more about your IEP rights, in **Chapter 7 of our IDEA Parent Guide.**)
- Talk to your son and encourage his participation in relevant discussions and planning. Seventh grade is the ideal time to begin to include students in these conversations.

Your son will better understand his LD when he can listen to and then participate in problem-solving discussions about the resources and accommodations that he needs. This will help him to grow the self-advocacy skills he will need as a high school student and beyond.

Here are two more articles that might be helpful:

- [Tips for Keeping an IEP Current](#)
- [Four Important Signs That Your Child's IEP Is Working](#)

**Q.** *My daughter's school didn't make AYP last year. What does it mean for my daughter? She's getting special education services through an IEP. Should I transfer her to a different school?*

**A.** If a school doesn't make its **Annual Yearly Progress (AYP)** goals, it doesn't mean that parents should withdraw their children and look for other educational settings. There are many reasons why a school might not meet AYP goals — reasons that are unlikely to impact the school's ability to serve your daughter. For example, schools with large numbers of students who are English language learners or schools that may have had a large turn-over of seasoned teachers may struggle to meet AYP goals during a particular year.

Schools that don't meet AYP goals must design and implement school-wide improvement plans that are intended to get student achievement back on track. A school's implementation plan can

actually be a good thing for students like your daughter whose special status is sure to be the focus of scrutiny as the school strives to satisfy its AYP goals.

What's most important is whether your daughter is making good progress in school and if the school is helping her achieve academic success based on the goals specified on her IEP. If you feel the school isn't serving your daughter's needs well, visit NCLD's **Finding a School** section to explore your options.

**Q.** *My child has been identified with LD, but the school is not providing effective help. What actions should I take?*

**A.** It depends on whether or not your child is eligible for special education services. Even though your child has been identified with a learning disability, he or she **isn't automatically eligible for services**.

If your child has an IEP, communicate your concerns in writing to the IEP team and request to reconvene a meeting so you can discuss your questions and concerns. If the situation doesn't improve, you have the right to request a due process hearing or **file a complaint** with your state's education agency or the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights.

If your child isn't eligible for an IEP, express your concerns to the school in writing and request a conference to include information (data) on what strategies are being used to teach your child and what progress is being made. Ask lots of questions!

This information will be critical in making decisions about next steps for your child. You may also want to **ask for a 504 plan**.

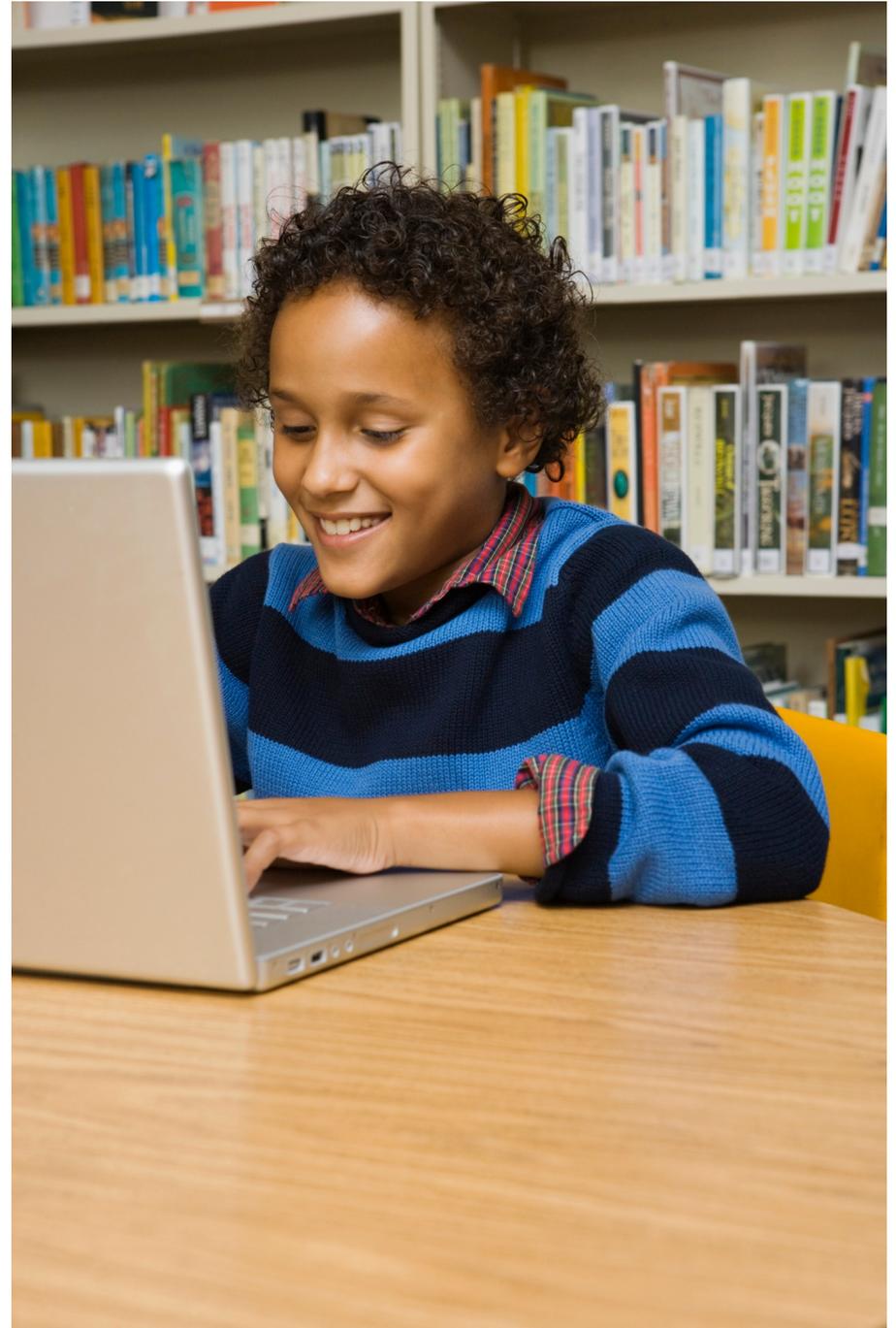
Whether or not your child has an IEP, if your child has been formally identified with a learning disability, you can get free information and support from your local **Parent Training and Information Center**.

**Video: What Should Parents Do If  
Their Child Is Not Eligible For an IEP**

## 504 Plans, Accommodations, and Assistive Technology

There are many paths to progress, and formal special education identification (and the creation of an IEP) is just one. Our experts reiterate the importance of parents as informed consumers and decision makers, and respond to questions on such topics as 504 plans, assistive technologies, testing accommodations, and online learning as ways to address, encourage, and facilitate student learning.

**Video: What Is a 504 Plan?**



**Q.** *My 7-year-old has a 504 plan for behavior issues, but the school is not implementing it. They say they don't have a place for her when she has these problems and that if she keeps doing it they will suspend her. Is that allowed?*

**A.** A 504 plan is different from an IEP in that it does not fall under "special education." That said, your child does have legal protections under 504. In **Developing a Successful 504 Plan for K-12 Students**, you can see that "...if, for some reason, you don't believe a 504 plan is sufficiently meeting your child's needs, you can always decide to: revise the 504 plan, add special education services (although rare, this is allowed under 504 law), re-evaluate for IDEA eligibility, hire outside educational support (e.g., tutor), seek professional advocacy support..."

Another resource is **Parent Rights in the Era of RTI**. This might help you make decisions about next steps if the school is implementing RTI (also known as MTSS).

What the school cannot do is suspend your child (whose 504 plan is specific about the type of services and support she needs) because they don't have sufficient personnel or space for her. You might ask for guidance from your state or regional **Parent Technical Information Center (PTI)**.

**Q.** *My child's 504 plan includes an accommodation called "procedural guides for math." Where can I find examples of this for middle school math?*

**A.** An excellent resource for this type of guidance is the book, **Teaching Mathematics Meaningfully: Solutions for Reaching Struggling Learners** by David H. Allsopp, Maggie M. Kyger, and LouAnn H. Lovin.

Two other books to look at are:

- **Number Sense and Number Nonsense: Understanding the Challenges of Learning Math** by Nancy Krasa and Sara Skunkwiler
- **Understanding RTI in Mathematics** by Russell Gersten and Rebecca Newman-Gonchar

**Q.** *What are some of the most effective testing accommodations for my child with LD?*

**A.** This is a very popular question, and the answer should always be that it depends upon your child's individual needs. Students with LD are a diverse group, and **effective testing accommodations** for student A may not be the most effective for student B. It's also important to consider the specific situation for which an accommodation is being considered. For example, your child might benefit from extended time or having test items read aloud (in person or via recording or

digitized text-to-speech software) for one exam, but might not need it for another.

As a parent, the best thing you can do is to **keep in close contact with your child's IEP team** and any other professionals with whom you work to determine the best accommodations for your child—and make sure this is not a “one time” determination. You and your child's team should regularly revisit and re-assess your child's accommodations to see what is working, what isn't, and what can be changed.

When considering accommodations, ask if your child is missing an underlying or basic skill that would make accessing the test challenging for him or her. Even the best accommodations cannot make up for incomplete knowledge.

**Q.** *How can I determine the most appropriate assistive technology tools for my child with LD?*

**A.** **Making good decisions about assistive technology (AT)** starts with being an informed consumer. You can request an AT evaluation from your school district as part of the IEP or 504 plan process. Your child will then undergo an assessment to determine what technologies will best support his or her learning needs. Make sure that you (and any professionals involved in the evaluation) clearly define the specific issues you are trying to address with technology. This will help narrow your options and focus attention on tools that are a good fit for your child.

Make sure your child is involved in the **decision-making process** — for an AT tool to be effective, it has to be something your child is willing and able to use! When selecting any AT tool, a trial period may be helpful, and school districts should provide opportunities for exploring the features of a device or software application. Visit NCLD's **Assistive Technology** section for more tips on choosing and using AT.

**Q.** *I just found out that my child with LD needs to take an online class before he graduates. What do I need to consider when evaluating online learning opportunities for him?*

**A.** Online learning can be an exciting option for students, including those with LD. But not all virtual learning programs are of equal quality — and equally appropriate for students with LD. Before you enroll your son in a specific online learning opportunity, ask the following questions:

- Does the opportunity provide orientation to the online experience, practice using online features, and engaging with others in the online community?
- When and how will your child receive feedback about his progress?
- Does the opportunity provide for real-time adult contact, either via the computer, by phone, or in person? Where can your son go to get support if he is struggling?

- ❑ Does the online experience allow for personalization such as changing font sizes or adjusting the pace of delivery or amount of text that appears on a page?
- ❑ Do the activities offered tie directly into content that is consistent with state standards?
- ❑ If your child has an IEP or 504 plan with specific modifications and/or accommodations, how will these be carried over into the online course?

Check out the website of **iNACOL, the International Association for K-12 Online Learning**, for more on evaluating the quality of an online learning opportunity. And be sure to stay in touch with your child’s teachers and other professionals to ensure the opportunity being offered meets his learning needs.

**Q.** *How can I make sure my child with dyslexia has access to content learning?*

**A.** Technology has opened up a new world of content accessibility for struggling students. If your child is able to understand the content of instructional materials but struggles with the act of reading grade-level text, you’ll want to learn more about **Accessible Instructional Materials (AIM)**, specialized digital formats of textbooks and other printed materials that are provided to students with print-based disabilities. These digital formats make it possible for a student to **“listen” to text at the same time as “seeing” it on a computer screen or device.**

Research has shown this to be a particularly effective way for students with reading disabilities to access texts.

Talk to your child’s IEP team about how AIM and other forms of **assistive technology** can help your child stay on track with content learning.

**Q.** *My teen struggles with math. How can I help him?*

**A.** The most important first step is to be sure that he has sufficient understanding (or mastery) of the skills needed to complete a given assignment. Partner closely with his teachers to make sure he is receiving the kind of targeted instruction and support that will help him succeed.

As you help with homework, you can break down concepts into learnable parts and explain the “big picture” with regard to the problems at hand. Give your son examples of how to think about the problem, establish a plan of attack, and implement a strategy or problem-solving process. When he thinks he has found the answer, help him reflect upon it to see whether it seems to make sense. If he gets “stuck” at a point in the problem or goes off in a direction that will result in an incorrect answer, give him prompts to get back on track.

The use of a **calculator or other assistive technology** can be very helpful for teens who struggle with math. If appropriate, make sure this is included in your son’s IEP or 504 plan, if he has one.

**Video: Assistive Technology & Learning Disabilities**

## Emotional Impact — At School and Home

Let's face it — having a learning disability is not fun! It not only demands extra-hard work from children but also places demands on families to provide very focused and ongoing types of academic and emotional support. Our experts acknowledge the importance of framing LD as a family affair, with adults and siblings working together to ensure that students can effectively deal with feelings of stress and frustration. They also talk to the issue of siblings and how important it is to address the needs of every family member in ways that enhance understanding and appreciation of the LD journey.



**Q.** *I think my daughter might have a learning disability, but my husband thinks she just needs to work harder on her school work. I want to help her now, but maybe we should wait and see. What should I do?*

**A.** This is a very common situation! Don't allow this to be a point of contention in your family. It sounds like you and your husband both agree that your daughter is underachieving in school, and no one can put a finger on why or what to do about it.

The first step is to talk about known obstacles that might be contributing to your daughter's lack of progress. A number of factors could be involved: a teacher who is frequently absent, missing textbooks, a class in which instruction is moving too fast or for which she was not well prepared by last year's teacher. If you **suspect that she might have a learning disability**, discuss what that means, how you all feel about the possibility, and make a decision without delay to discover whether it's true. And a word of advice: Don't play the blame game! Instead, think about solutions.

If she indeed has LD, hard work alone will not be enough to turn things around. She will need to work "smarter, not just harder" even with the best help, and turning frustration into success will take time. **Your husband's active participation in the discovery process** is important: having him as a ready and willing partner if and when it's time to approach school

personnel and formally request assistance will only help your daughter in the future.

**Q.** *My husband and I are so focused on helping our son (with LD) get through school that we don't have much time for fun together as a family. How can we help our son be successful in school and still have time (and energy) for other activities?*

**A.** It's important to have "family" time away from school work. Get together with your husband and son and have a heart-to-heart talk. Together you can brainstorm ways to enjoy special family time and still make sure that schoolwork stays on track.

Questions for you and your family to consider:

- How could you reallocate some weeknight time to allow for family activities?
- How can you create "family time" inside the house? It might mean "hands off" cell phones, allowing computers to lapse into "sleep" mode, and gathering at the kitchen table with a deck of cards, an arts-and-crafts project, or time spent around a common interest (e.g., family history or photo albums).
- Are there **assistive technologies** (like text-to-speech software) that could help your son be more independent

with his school work so you can have more “adult” time with your spouse?

Teachers can help, especially when it comes to being sensitive to family needs. I’ll bet if your son asked each of his instructors for ways to decrease his workload for the purposes of preserving “family time,” he would be pleasantly surprised.

As hard as it is to keep up the energy and inertia, be assured that considering these questions now will have enormous benefit for your son once he graduates from high school and needs to negotiate (without the same intensity of support from his parents) the demands of college or the workplace.

### Video: Reading Tips for Children with LD

**Q.** *I have two children, a 10-year-old who has an LD and a 12-year-old who doesn't. My non-LD child is starting to act up and wants more of my attention. Do you have any tips for how I can balance both their needs?*

**A.** The person who has LD usually gets most of our attention, but you are right to recognize the needs of others, for understanding, for appreciation, and for equally deserved attention. With Abraham Maslow’s “hierarchy of needs” in mind, here are examples of what your non-LD child might be thinking and saying (or feeling):

- "How come he gets more hugs than I do? And for things like finishing homework!"
  - Physiology (having to do with comfort and the physical body)
- "I'm always doing things for her; when was the last time she did something for me?"
  - Belongingness and love (feeling attachment to others)
- "What about my report card? Pretty good, huh?"
  - Esteem (having your thoughts and actions valued by others)
- "Is she ever going to be able to do her work on her own?"
  - Knowledge and understanding (seeking information)
- "I wish I knew how to really help him when he's feeling down on himself."
  - Aesthetic (deriving pleasure and triggering emotion)

By better understanding the range of different needs and human emotions that come into play when some family members have LD and others don't, you'll be able to help all your children cope with feelings of jealousy, embarrassment, anger, worry, and guilt. As **siblings and family members of someone with LD**, there's no escaping this personal "baggage." Open and honest communication is not easy, but it is essential to the well-being of the entire family.

Learn how other parents balance their children's different needs in our podcast, [A Parent's Perspective — Multiple Children, Multiple Challenges](#).

**Q.** *My daughter is dyslexic and she also has trouble making and keeping friends. Could her LD be affecting her social skills?*

**A.** Very possibly yes. Some children with dyslexia struggle with listening or reading comprehension and some have difficulty with word-finding and poor receptive and expressive vocabulary skills. If your daughter has these types of problems, she's probably had embarrassing moments when she misheard the teacher, made mistakes while reading aloud in class, or misused a word in conversation. These could have an impact on how she is perceived by her peers and either cause them to pull away or worse, tease her or limit their social interactions with her.

For some children with LD, this situation is made worse because they have trouble reading social cues. They may not realize that they are standing too close to the listener during conversation or they may repeat a joke that was just told thinking that they might get a second laugh from the same crowd. It's important to provide kind but direct feedback, [appropriate modeling](#), and lots of opportunities to practice — that can make a huge difference in helping children with LD to "fit in" and [enjoy satisfying social connections](#) with their

peers. Remember: LD is not one thing; it is a category under which many different types of specific disorders may reside. And social and emotional issues often go hand in hand with deficits in academic learning.

For more information, read our article, [Developing Social Skills and Relationships](#).

**Q.** *My 7th-grade son has LD and really low self-esteem. What can I do to help?*

**A.** The pre-teen years can be tough — children are hyper-aware of who's talking to whom, where kids sit in the lunchroom, what grades people get on quizzes, and on and on. Add in the worry about how a learning disability already makes them feel "different" and you have a self-esteem train wreck waiting to happen. Your son's feelings about himself didn't develop overnight, and [repairing \(or bolstering\) his feelings of self-worth](#) will take time. Here are a few tips:

- Recognize his specific areas of strength, competence, and need. Don't forget to consider non-academic areas such as art, music, or sports.
- [Teach social skills](#) the same way you would academic skills: one step at a time, demonstrating and giving multiple examples, and offering practice and feedback. Find opportunities for him to apply his newly learned skills and behaviors in different settings.

- Try to minimize competition and focus instead on cooperative learning — at home and in the classroom. Work with your son's teachers to create opportunities for shared learning and peer-focused activities. This is a great way to build social and emotional connections and enhance self-esteem.

You'll find addition tips in [Resources to Help Build Your Child's Self-Esteem](#).

**Q.** *My child with LD is also socially awkward and I think it interferes with her school success. Can the school help my daughter with this?*

**A.** Children with learning disabilities often **struggle to develop the skills they need to be competent in social situations**. If your child has an IEP or 504 plan, you may want to request that it include goals related to social competence, especially if you think they're interfering with your child's success in school. These goals might be made attainable through specific social skills intervention programs that focus on role playing and practicing specific skills in small groups.

And at home, keep in mind that behavioral regulations are a pre-requisite for learning. Make sure your child has good sleeping and eating habits, is used to following rules, and can complete daily routines. For a student who may have co-existing disorders of attention, behavior, and learning, these routines are especially important. Once these skills are

in place, your child will have greater capacity to focus on his or her learning — at school and at home.

Read these articles for more ideas about how you can help your child:

- [Tips for Helping Your Child Build Social Skills](#)
- [Developing Social Skills and Relationships](#)
- [Building Social Skills Resources](#)

**Q.** *My child will be evaluated soon for learning disabilities. Will this cause him extra stress? He's already stressed out about school.*

**A.** Any test situation — including an evaluation for LD — automatically contains an element of anxiety and stress. The good news is that the professionals doing the testing should be well trained and experienced in working with (and sensitive to) children who have a history of academic struggle.

As a parent, there are several ways you can help to alleviate the stress:

- Explain to your child why this testing is taking place. Let your child know that the tests are designed to help adults understand why school is such a struggle for them even though they're trying really hard to do well.

- ❑ Let your child know that the tests are not going to be painful and they're most likely to include a mix of puzzles, questions, games, stories, and drawings.
- ❑ Tell your child that what's most important is that they give each test their best effort. The results will help the teachers know how they can better help them succeed in school.
- ❑ Schedule the tests for a time during the day when you know your child usually functions best. Make sure your child is well rested and isn't hungry.

The more you understand the evaluation process, the less stress you'll feel (and show), and the more you'll be able to reassure your child. Two articles might be helpful: [A Parent's Perspective – The Parent Role in the LD Evaluation Process \(audio\)](#) and [10 Things You Need to Know about LD Evaluation](#).

**Q.** *I have two children with LD – one is 8 and the other is 14. I'm worried about how stress impacts them on a day-to-day basis. What should I do?*

**A.** Students with LD experience much more stress than their peers without LD, both over the course of the day and in response to acute stressors like standardized tests. This can affect their ability to think, learn, and express what they know. Over time, these stressors can lead to negative emotions, depressed moods, physical complaints (like upset stomach), and anxiety.

Here are three ways you can help both children:

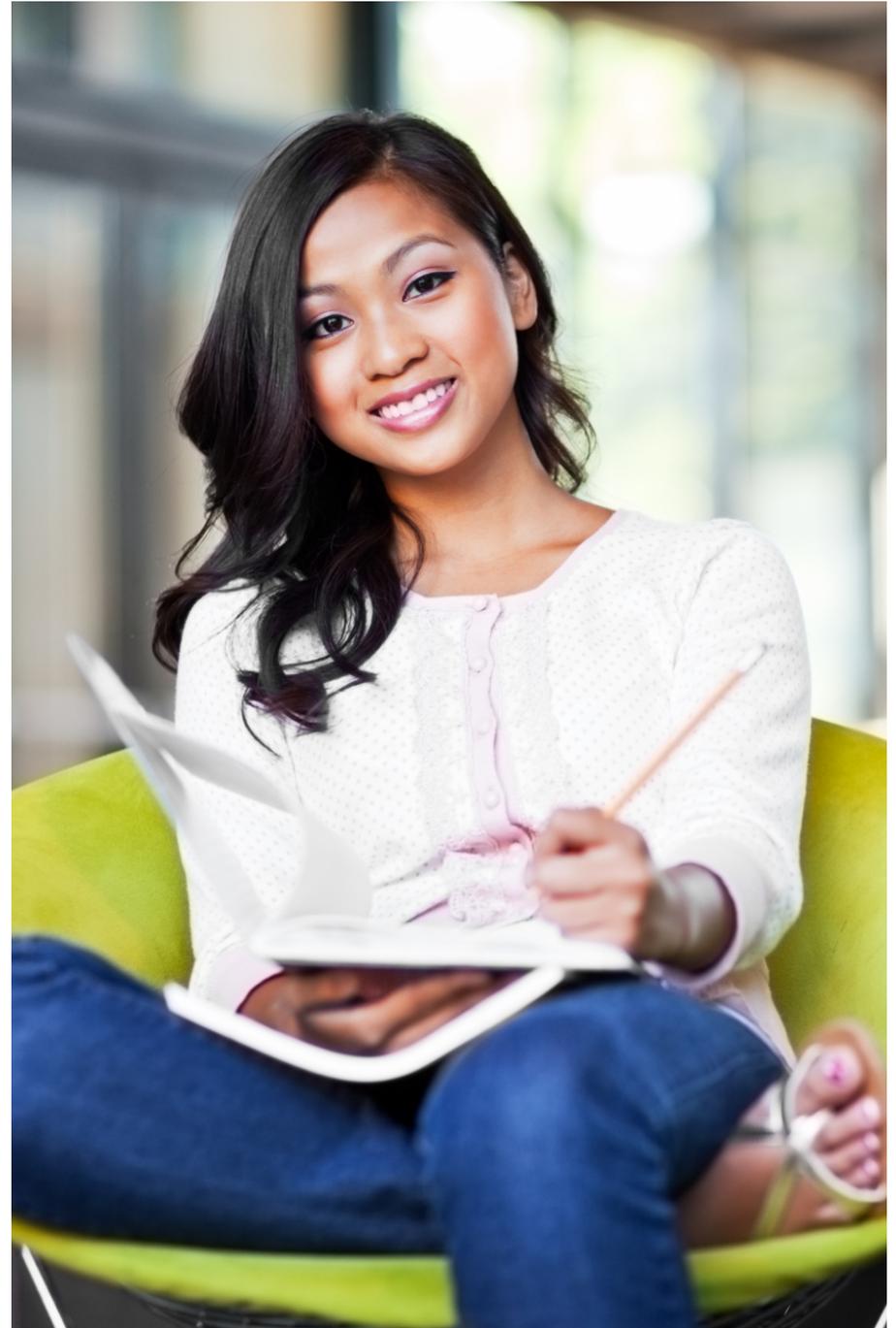
- ❑ Teach them  **coping skills to overcome stress**. Building these concrete skills will help them now and throughout their life.
- ❑ Make it a habit to ask how they feel about situations, especially those at school. Ask questions such as: Why do you think that happened? How did you feel? What did you do when it happened? What do you think you should do if something like this happens again?
- ❑ At the dinner table, have family members take turns telling each other about the “best” and “toughest” parts of the day. When parents model how to talk about feelings, it makes it easier for children and teens to follow suit.

Most importantly, be a good listener. It's less important to propose solutions than to be a sounding board and a safe outlet for your children to express their feelings.

You'll find additional tips in these articles: [Positive Emotions: Helping a Teen with LD Cope Better with Stress](#) and [Stress in Children and Adolescents: Tips for Parents](#).

## Preparing Teens for College and Work

Every child with LD deserves the opportunity to explore and plan for post-secondary life after high school. College-bound students need help to understand and anticipate the new types of challenges they will encounter when they are faced with the demands of college coursework and requirements. Those who are heading off to the workplace will need assistance understanding the many, often unspoken complexities of on-the-job performance. And those who choose to combine these options, or perhaps engage in apprenticeship or internship experiences will need guidance making the most of these opportunities as stepping stones toward independence. Our experts respond to questions about these issues and offer comments about the process of disclosing one's LD.



**Q.** *My high school-aged daughter wants a part-time job to earn spending money. She has dyslexia, and I'm worried that a job will interfere with her schoolwork. Shouldn't she just focus on school right now?*

**A.** You are smart to worry. However, remember that success is not just about getting good grades — it's about how your daughter feels about herself and her ability to be successful (and feel valued) in life, including the workplace. A part-time job can provide her with an opportunity to do something she likes and to “spread her wings” a little and grow in new ways. And let's not overlook the rewards of having some pocket money and the opportunity to save for something she really wants!

Help her set up a calendar so she can keep track of responsibilities at school, at home, and on the job. As long as she can plan ahead about getting schoolwork done and keeping up her grades, a job sounds like a great way to get valuable experience that will help her make a smooth transition from high school to college or work. Your daughter's dyslexia won't go away after she graduates and a part-time job will be a great way for her to explore ways to be successful in a work environment.

Here are some articles and a video you can share with your daughter:

- [Helping Your 11th or 12th Grader with Career Preparation and “Fit”](#)

- [Tips for Workplace Success](#)
- [How Can I Get Work Experience?: Volunteer and Paid Jobs for Teens](#)
- [Helping Teens with LD Explore a Career Path](#)

**Q.** *My 17-year-old son has LD. He's struggled so much during school and I'm really worried about whether he can handle college. I don't want to discourage him, but I also want him to be realistic.*

**A.** “College” is more than one thing, and your son has several options that are worth exploring. Many students with LD look to community colleges as opportunities to ease their way into college coursework, with the option of graduating with an associate degree and then transferring to a four-year institution. Other students choose to enroll in undergraduate study programs at colleges and universities. Either way, students with LD should make sure that they take advantage of the services available through their school's office of disability services.

There are also other options your son might explore, such as [internships, apprenticeships, and career and technical education](#) that would allow him to specialize in an area of study or skill that would help him get a job.

The last two years of high school are a great time to help your son start to consider what his long-term goals might be — such as what [kind of a career he would like to have](#). Those long-term

goals might help him to understand what his short-term goals need to be – whether to go to a two-year or four-year college, a specialized training school, or to enter an apprenticeship program. You'll find additional information in our sections on [Post-High School Options](#) and [Teens & Transition](#).

**Video: How Can I Ease My Child's Transition from High School to College?**

**Q.** *My teen doesn't want to go to college — she wants to get a job after high school so she can start making money and live on her own. She doesn't want to tell potential employers about her LD, but I think she should. I'm worried that she won't get the support she needs in the workplace. What do you think?*

**A.** Your daughter's decision to take a break from the classroom doesn't mean that she won't go back at some point, perhaps part time, to college or some other type of post-secondary schooling.

It's a personal decision as to whether **she discloses her learning disability** during a job interview, waits until after getting settled in on the job, or says nothing at all. Each of those decisions could have significant consequences. As obvious as it might seem, the most important first step along her school-to-work path is to make sure she's fully aware about **how her LD impacts her ability to perform** certain tasks and how she can work around her LD in order to accomplish her goals.

Once she's been offered a position, she needs to think about the specific demands that will be placed upon her and what, if any, type of help she'll need to fulfill her job responsibilities. If she discloses her LD to her employer (and some employers require documentation in the form of a letter or evaluation report), federal law states that she must be provided with "reasonable" on-the-job assistance, accommodations or modifications. If she chooses not to disclose her LD, even if she is well-qualified for the job, she's on her own — **federal law** can't protect her.

**Video: How Can I Prepare My Teen with LD for the Workplace?**

**Q.** *My son wants to get a job or internship during the summer. He plans to tell prospective employers about his LD, but he's not sure how to do it. What do you recommend?*

**A.** What a wonderful example of self-advocacy! As your son explains his LD, he'll need to use language the employer can understand — it's best to be brief and positive. He'll need to offer specific examples of how his LD may affect his performance on the job and describe what accommodations or modifications he'll need to be successful.

For example, he might say: "I have a learning disability that affects my understanding of multi-step instructions when they are given verbally. You can help me by giving me instructions in writing, allowing me to either write them down as you

speak, or to record them with my iPhone. In my most challenging classes, my teachers posted messages with instructions on the school website, and it worked out fine. In fact, I got an ‘A’ in my hardest class.”

Your son might find it helpful to provide a simple fact sheet on LD to his employer, such as NCLD’s article, [What Are Learning Disabilities?](#)

Once your son has come to an agreement with his employer about his specific LD-related needs, he might want to ask for a memo or letter that documents the discussion and describes the specific accommodations that have been arranged.

**Q.** *I’m worried about my daughter’s future. I still need to help her every night with homework — and she’s now in high school. I’m exhausted. Will she ever get through college without my help?*

**A.** It’s normal to worry about your child’s future. You’ve watched her struggle through the years and it sounds like you’re doing everything you can to keep your daughter on a path to graduate high school. You also know that her LD won’t disappear when she’s handed her high school diploma.

But your exhaustion suggests that some adjustments might be in order. If she’s spending too many hours each night doing homework, suggest that she talk to her teachers and see whether they might be willing to scale back the volume of

work without sacrificing the focused practice they want her to have. It’s also important that you not function as your daughter’s personal assistant. Look at her assignments and see if there are **organizational strategies** that she can learn and initiate without your help.

Perhaps most helpful might be **finding assistive technology tools** that will replace or augment the help you have been providing. She’s going to need these skills (and tools) once she graduates from high school and enters the next phase of her life. Now is the time to get her on a path toward independence.

Here are some helpful resources:

- [Accommodations, Techniques, and Aids for Learning](#)
- [Assistive Technology: Getting the Right Supports for Your Student \(podcast\)](#)

**Q.** *My child has really struggled in school because of his LD and I’m not sure he even wants to attempt to go to college. Is it important that he graduate with a regular high school diploma?*

**A.** **Earning a regular high school diploma is crucial for students with LD.** Dropping out of high school or obtaining a non-standard diploma can significantly restrict a student’s options for post-secondary employment, education, or career training.

The diploma issue is not just one that parents of high school students need to consider. Parents of students in all grades

need to make sure their students are on track for a regular diploma. Unfortunately, some schools give up on students with LD early in their school career and put students on a course of study that does not lead to a regular diploma. This can happen as early as elementary school. Luckily, as a parent, you can help prevent this. Use your child's yearly IEP meeting to check in and make sure that the curriculum, assessments, and supports offered will keep him or her on track to earn a regular high school diploma.

**Q.** *My daughter is applying to college this year. When during the college application process does she disclose having LD?*

**A.** College applications do not provide a place for a person to disclose their LD. In fact, colleges are prohibited by law from inquiring about an applicant's disability status. Your daughter is under no obligation to disclose her LD during the application process, or at any other point as a college student. Keep in mind, however, that in order to receive formal accommodations on campus, she'll need to disclose her LD and provide documentation to college officials — but this can be done at any time after admission.

A student may choose to disclose a LD during the application process in order to help college admissions officers better understand them as a learner or explain course selections and major highs and lows on their high school transcript. If your

daughter chooses to do this, it is important that she keep her explanation positive, emphasizing what she has been able to overcome and the strengths she possesses.

Be sure to check out our [Checklist for Transitioning from High School to College](#)...and share it with your daughter, too! Reviewing the checklist together will help you both to learn what to expect during the transition to college and to make educated decisions regarding disclosure, accommodations, and more. Other helpful resources on LD.org include [Transitioning to College for Students with Learning Disabilities](#) and [Planning for College Success for Students with Learning Disabilities](#).

**Q.** *What key things should I be doing to help my teen with LD prepare for the transition to college and the workplace?*

**A.** [Transition planning](#) is super important and it needs to start as early as possible. Formal transition planning is required as part of the IEP once your student reaches age 16, although it should start much earlier. [Read your child's IEP](#) carefully to make sure that appropriate goals have been set to address transition issues and to make sure he or she is on track for a regular high school diploma. For specifics about formal transition planning, read Chapter 8 of our IDEA Parent Guide: [Transition — Planning Your Child's Future Success](#).

You can also help your teen understand how the college or workplace experience will differ from the K-12 setting: they will no longer have a formal IEP or 504 plan and they'll have

to choose whether or not to disclose their LD to professors and colleagues. Your teen will also face new challenges with satisfying course requirements, class participation (and attendance!), test taking, time management, and more. And strong self-advocacy skills become even more important than ever. The more young adults know about their LD and their specific strengths and weaknesses, the better prepared they will be to advocate for themselves and get the help they need to succeed.

Check out these resources for more information:

- LD.org's [Teens and Transition](#) section
- [Checklist for Transitioning from High School to College](#)

**Video: Teen with LD, Jonathan Ferrera**

**Getting a Job 101 E-Book**

## Related Issues — AD/HD and Giftedness

Learning disabilities impact the lives of children and families in many different ways, and parents are always searching for ways to better understand and address the needs of their children. A number of question about co-occurring disorders of attention, problems with behavior, alternative therapies, and the presence of special talents (co-occurring with learning disabilities, also referred to “twice exceptional” or “gifted and LD”) are answered by our experts.



**Q.** *My child is struggling in school, but I'm not sure if it's a learning, attention, and/or a behavior disorder. How do I know what to address first?*

**A.** First talk with your child's pediatrician, especially if you think there could be an attention or behavior issue. The **symptoms of AD/HD and LD often overlap**, and it's not always easy to determine the problem. Share your concerns and offer specific examples of **problem situations**. **Your child's doctor can be an important partner** in discovering the problem and in managing the solution.

At any time you can request that your child's school **conduct a special education evaluation** to see if he or she has a learning disability. (Submit your request in writing.) The school is required to assess your child in all areas of suspected disability; and you can indicate the suspected areas on the request form. Keep in mind that while the school can identify problems with attention issues, they cannot diagnose AD/HD — only a doctor can do that.

These articles will also help you understand your next steps:

- **If You Suspect a Child Has a Learning Disability**
- **Four Important Steps to Take Before a Formal Evaluation**
- **A Parent's Perspective — Taking the Private Route for LD Evaluation**

**Q.** *Are "alternative therapies" worth trying with my child who has LD and AD/HD? I'm nervous about trying some of these things, but I don't want to miss something that may really help. What should I do?*

**A.** It's natural to want to do everything you can to help your child, but "alternative therapies" are usually not based on solid scientific information (including independent research). It's important that you make informed decisions, otherwise you'll be wasting your money (and unnecessarily raising your child's hopes). That said, there is lots that we don't know about LD and there's no way to know if or how a particular therapy will work unless you try it. Counseling and therapy can help to manage stress, develop insight, and learn coping skills. Exercise and proper diet can also result in changes that improve quality of life. As per special colored lenses, memory-enhancing software, train-the-brain types of exercises, and other controversial therapies, we have more questions than answers, the most important being "for which students are given therapies most likely to deliver what specific kinds of benefit, over what period of time?"

Keep in mind that LD and AD/HD cannot be "cured" and they won't go away with time. If you decide to try a particular therapy, be absolutely sure it does no harm. Nevertheless, your child can learn how to lessen the impact of LD or AD/HD with research-based interventions, therapies, and accommodations. Success is possible! Work with the school to **make sure his or her IEP or 504 plan is effective**, and includes specific

interventions, **accommodations**, and assistive technology. And if your child has AD/HD, work with your child’s doctor to make sure the medication is proving to be effective — sometimes a change in dosage or class of medication is needed.

For more information, read NCLD’s articles **Controversial Therapies: What Parents Need to Know** and **Managing the Problem Situations of LD and AD/HD: Partnering with Your Child's Doctor**.

**Q.** *My son is really talented artistically, but he also has a hard time with academics. Could he be gifted and also have a learning disability?*

**A.** Absolutely! Learning disabilities is the umbrella term used to capture many different types of specific disorders, such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, and dysgraphia. While some people have problems in one or more specific areas of learning and performance, they may **enjoy success and even excel in others**. In fact, students with LD often demonstrate unusual abilities to “think outside the box,” and the products of their expression, be it artwork, poetry, music, or interpersonal skills, made possible by hard work and a determination of spirit, are no less remarkable and praiseworthy than those of their non-disabled peers. One look at the **Hidden Thoughts of LD art gallery** or a read through of the **Anne Ford and Allegra Ford Scholarship winners’ essays** and your question will be answered without a shadow of a doubt.

### **Video: Advice on How Can Parents Advocate to Support Their Child's Giftedness**

**Q.** *My child is really bright (gifted and LD) and is still struggling in school. When I mention this to his teachers, no one seems to know what to do. What’s your advice?*

**A.** **Twice-exceptional students** can be a bit of an enigma. Many remain “hidden” until middle school and even high school, when the work load and demands of departmentalized instruction (different subjects, different teachers, different types of assignments and assessments) becomes too much to juggle without targeted types of instruction and accommodations. Parents often find that neither general nor special education teachers know exactly what to do with students who are both gifted and have LD — so it’s even more important that you be a well-informed advocate.

It can be helpful to be very specific as you bring up your concerns with school personnel. Some twice-exceptional students excel in some areas and struggle in others. Make sure you clearly communicate which areas are troublesome, and provide evidence (work samples, test scores, etc.) where possible.

If your child has an IEP or 504 plan, consider asking the team to reconvene to address your child’s ongoing struggles. It’s important to identify exactly what is causing your child to struggle: reviewing his evaluation can help you and his team figure out what his specific areas of weakness are. Then, the

team can design interventions and accommodations that will help your child overcome those struggles. (If your child does not qualify for IEP or 504 supports, [watch this video](#) for tips to support your child at school.)

## Join Our Online Community

In addition to checking out our website — [LD.org](#) — there are lots of ways to stay current on LD issues and get great, free resources. Simply “like” us on [Facebook](#), follow us on [Twitter](#), and visit us on [Pinterest](#) to stay in touch.

