Is ADHD a Learning Disability?

by LANA BARHUM

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Many people consider ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) a learning disability, but it is not one. It does, however, affect learning.

Why the Confusion?

Up to 50 percent of children with ADHD also have a learning disability, this according to the Learning Disabilities Association of America. Both conditions combined make learning harder.

The typical symptoms of ADHD – inattention and behavioral problems – are also signs of a possible learning disability.

While ADHD is not a learning disability, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), considers it as such, so children with ADHD are eligible for special education services. IDEA is a United States law that ensures students with disabilities are provided free educational services tailored to their needs, so they have the same opportunities as children without disabilities.

An ADHD diagnosis may not be made until a child has been in school for a few years, leaving gaps in basic math and reading skills. Moreover, even if a child with ADHD does not have a learning disability, he or she will still need educational intervention to get caught up.

How Does the ADHD Brain Work?

Interestingly, studies have shown that people with ADHD have higher than average intelligence. Further, researchers have long tried to figure how exactly the ADHD brain works.

Most of us prioritize tasks based on what is most important, and we work and motivate ourselves based on our schedules and what we must get done in a certain amount of time.

People with ADHD have a harder time determining priority, and that makes it difficult for them to start and complete tasks. However, it does not mean they lack intelligence or are incapable of completing projects; it simply means their brains process things differently.

Moreover, people with ADHD tend to have too many things going on inside their minds. This makes it difficult to determine what is most important at the right time.

How Does ADHD Affect Learning?

ADHD affects learning because it causes difficulty with focus, attention, and behavior. Many students with ADHD

struggle with the inability to control impulses, manage time, organize their thoughts and learnings, and even have good peer relationships.

The entire school experience cannot be challenging for children with ADHD. That is because of the main symptoms of ADHD – inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsiveness – make meeting the daily routine of the school day harder.

Inattention causes students to miss valuable information during a lesson or affect the ability to be organized with assignments. It also causes daydreaming rather than paying attention to what is going on in the classroom.

Hyperactivity is expressed in verbal (i.e. excessive talking or interrupting) or physical (i.e. breaking pencils or crayons or tearing paper or books) disruptions while in the classroom.

Impulsiveness may lead to careless mistakes, rushing through work, and only attending to activities they find more interesting.

ADHD vs. a Learning Disability

While ADHD and learning disabilities share common characteristics, they are very different.

Causes

Researchers do not know the exact cause of ADHD, but they have found differences in the brain development of people with ADHD. Researchers at the Kennedy Institute determined this by looking at the brains of children with ADHD and children without the disorder.

What they found was that certain parts of the brain, such as those responsible for cognitive and motor control, were smaller in children with ADHD. The children who have lower volumes in the studied areas were also reported to have problems with attention, impulsiveness, and hyperactivity.

By contrast, people with learning disabilities experience different neurological brain function than people without learning disabilities, this according to the National Center for Learning Disabilities. These differences affect a person’s ability to receive, keep, process, retrieve and communicate information and result in difficulties with speaking, reading, writing, problem-solving and even following directions.

Diagnosis

Because ADHD is a medical condition, it requires a medical diagnosis from a doctor experienced in ADHD processes and treatment.

A school psychologist can make a learning disability diagnosis after identifying performance behaviors and making educational assessments.

Recognition and Distinction

The main characteristics of ADHD include the inability to concentrate, maintain attention, sit for long periods and react without thinking. These symptoms cause problems with learning and are often confused with learning disabilities.

The term “learning disability” refers to several different learning difficulties. These include, but are not limited to:

- Dyslexia, which causes problems with reading and writing.
- Dyscalculia, which causes difficulty with understanding numbers and learning math.
- Auditory processing disorder, which affects how sound travels to the ears and is interpreted by the brain.
- Visual processing disorder, which causes a mismatch with what the eyes see versus what the brain

processes.

Learning disabilities affect neurological processing, and this interferes with learning. Learning disabilities may also have an impact on a person’s life beyond learning and impact personal relationships and even affect job performance.

Treatment

ADHD is treated with a combination of behavior therapy and stimulant medication. There is no medical treatment for learning disabilities, but learning can be modified to help students learn and retain information better.

Difficulties

Children with ADHD and learning disabilities can struggle to keep up and feel connected with their peers. Moreover, these conflicts can affect them as they get older and experience setbacks.

Parent’s Role

An important thing to keep in mind if your child has ADHD, a learning disability or both, is that schools have many tools at their disposal to help students who are struggling.

However, it is your responsibility, as the parent, to take the steps necessary to make sure your child has every tool available and every advantage to succeed in school and life.

I give this advice as a parent myself who has two unique and different sons – one who has struggled academically for most of his primary and secondary education and another who is extremely bright but struggles with sitting in a classroom.