

Undiagnosed Disabilities

Children, adolescents and adults with undiagnosed disabilities can be challenging for the student, the teacher and staff when students are attending school. There are so many different medical conditions which can impact a child's ability to participate, socialize, focus and thrive in a school environment. For education staff working with children with undiagnosed disabilities, the first step to assisting students is to know what is normal child behaviour and development is and to understand when behaviours or actions seem to be abnormal.

With so many different physical and mental conditions which can affect a child's success in school and it is not expected that all education will know how to handle situations that are unknown. However, all staff, whether they are teachers, support staff or the bus driver can play a role in observing learners and reporting abnormal behaviours or concerns to the school administration. It's likely the school administration has established processes and procedures to investigate such instances and the school administration may determine if specialized services are required.

- A formal assessment could reveal learning disabilities or developmental disabilities.
- A psychological assessment can identify the young person's learning style.
- Treatment options may include parental guidance counselling, individual therapy for the child or teen, family therapy, or a combination of these approaches.
- Specific working memory training may be indicated following an assessment to help the young person with their learning challenges and/or attention/hyperactivity difficulties.
- Practitioners are trained to deal with the following difficulties of childhood and adolescence: Mood disorders, (anxiety/depression / early onset mental illness), anger control difficulties, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), bereavement, difficulties adjusting to parental divorce and separation, eating disorders, substance abuse, trauma and abuse, bullying, low self esteem and body image problems, learning disabilities, social skills difficulties, chronic illness, acquired brain injury, intellectual disability, Autism Spectrum Disorders.ⁱ

Undiagnosed learning disabilities make it difficult to identify a person's gifts. The longer learning disabilities go undiagnosed the more the frustration builds within the individual and in those around them. It affects self-esteem and confidence levels in ways that can impact any and all decisions in life.

Learning disabilities are neurological differences in the way the human brain processes, stores and communicates information. In extreme cases, they can cause individuals to miss out on literacy skills development, particularly when schools do not recognize the symptoms early on.ⁱⁱ

Watch for signs. A person could be showing difficulties in: underdeveloped writing skills, an avoidance of activities that involve reading and writing, poor spelling, coping strategies, low self-esteem and lack of confidence in certain areas.ⁱⁱⁱ

If something doesn't seem right through observation and listening, speak to a professional about the concerns. Here some common learning disabilities:

1. Dyslexia - There are different types of dyslexia but the most common kind affects a person's ability to break spoken words down into their component sounds. This causes difficulty in sounding out words in reading and developing spelling skills. When children are not able to read and write, it can cause them to quickly fall behind their peers. Over time this may lead to low performance across the curriculum and a negative attitude towards school and learning.
2. ADHD - The term ADHD refers to both Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder and Attention Deficit Disorder. The former is associated with impulsive behaviour, acting out, and difficulty sitting still, all of which can make it harder for a child to concentrate at school. Without the hyperactivity, students with ADD may be harder to spot but they will still struggle to follow lessons and complete school assignments.
3. Dyspraxia - While officially classed as a motor disability, people with dyspraxia can have trouble doing routine tasks that require fine motor skills, such as zipping up a backpack, combing their hair and even writing with a pen or pencil. They can also struggle with planning skills and may be overly clumsy. Due to its impact on writing and organizational skills, performance at school is sometimes affected.
4. Dysgraphia - When writing is problematic, dysgraphia may be to blame. It's a condition that can make it hard to form letters, space them appropriately and even line them up along an x-axis. Ideas may be harder to translate into written language and the content of a person's writing can be out of order or difficult to follow. In most cases it will be far below the level one would expect from a person's spoken language ability.
5. Processing difficulties - A learning difficulty can impact how our brain deals with information and lead to slow processing. In these situations, more time is needed for an individual to make sense of a stimulus and follow a series of steps or ideas. Visual processing disorders are when the information taken in by the eyes is not understood correctly by the brain, which can make it difficult to read and write.^{iv}

Research by Clements (1966) found the following ten frequently cited attributes: hyperactivity; impulsivity; perceptual-motor impairments; disorders of memory and thinking; emotional lability; academic difficulties; coordination problems; language deficits; disorders of attention; and equivocal neurological signs.^v

Research by Lerner (2000) identified nine learning and behavioral characteristics of individuals with learning disabilities: disorders of attention; reading difficulties; poor motor abilities; written language difficulties; oral language difficulties; social skills deficits; psychological process deficits; quantitative disorders; and information processing problems.^{vi}

There is an abundance of research available to learn more about disabilities. Here is a personal story about an adult student that struggled with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (November 18, 2021).

When I reached university, an inconsistent ability to focus and get work done led to me associating the concept of school with anxiety and uneasiness. Eventually, I learned that I wasn't dealing with typical school stress. I had been battling attention deficit

hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). But having gone undiagnosed for the majority of my education put me at a disadvantage when I got to university.

ADHD is a neurodevelopmental condition that causes differences in the brain relating to attention and activity levels, including hyperactivity and impulsivity, according to Medical News Today. Symptoms often begin in early childhood and can follow a person into adolescence and adulthood, according to Mayo Clinic.^{vii}

Keep learning about disabilities and the personal challenges that affect learning. The more you know, the better equipped you'll be at identifying when to take action to get a diagnosis. The sooner a diagnosis is determined, the sooner the process can begin to getting the necessary intervention.

ⁱ [Children's Mental Health Ontario | Moss Psychology | 613 689 7783 \(bellevillepsychologist.ca\)](#). Retrieved on March 18, 2022

ⁱⁱ [When learning disabilities in adults go undiagnosed \(readandspell.com\)](#). Retrieved on March 18, 2022

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v [Microsoft Word - Issue #3 LD Report Characteristic of LD \(naset.org\)](#). Retrieved on March 22, 2022

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} [Snap out of it: A journey of undiagnosed ADHD - On the Record \(ontherecordnews.ca\)](#). Retrieved on March 18, 2022