

Recognizing Learning Disorders and Disabilities in the Classroom

 childmind.org/article/recognizing-learning-disorders-in-the-classroom

Teachers are often the first to notice that a child might have a learning disorder. Sometimes the signs are easy to spot — a student who just isn't making headway in reading, for example. Or a child who, despite obvious effort, can't seem to master the times tables. But the signs are not always as clear, and many children, embarrassed that they are struggling to do things that seem easy for other kids, go to pains to hide their difficulties.

Here are some less-obvious signs of learning disorders in children to watch for in the classroom.

Not living up to his potential

If you notice that a student who seems as if he should be succeeding, but he isn't — either in one specific subject or in his overall school performance — it could be a sign that he has learning disorder.

This is often described as a **discrepancy between ability and aptitude** i.e. a gap between what it seems a student *should* be able to do and what he's actually able to do.

Some examples of how this gap might appear in the classroom include:

- A student who writes fantastic essays but has serious difficulty getting through basic math assignments, or vice versa.
- A kid who's great at answering questions in class but can't get her point down on paper.
- A student whose intelligence is obvious in person, but isn't reflected on his report card.

Not trying hard enough

Kids who aren't doing as well in school as expected may appear to be lazy or just not applying themselves, when in fact they may be struggling with a learning disorder. Adults with learning issues recall being told repeatedly, before they were diagnosed, that they weren't trying hard enough. Kids who look like they're not trying may actually be trying very hard, but failing, or trying to hide an embarrassing deficiency.

Off track

If a student constantly has to be reminded what to do next, you might think he's not paying attention, but it could be a sign that he's having difficulty with what's called "working memory" — holding, processing and building on new information. This is a common issue for

kids with learning disorders.

Other signs to watch for include:

- Difficulty following directions – especially if the student is hearing the information for the first time or there are several steps to remember
- Daydreaming
- Difficulty copying from the board
- Trouble remembering assignments and doing them correctly

Hiding out

Students with learning disorders often try conceal their struggles from teachers and peers. Even if they're managing to keep up with school work, with extra effort, it may be taking a big toll on their self esteem. If a student comes across as excessively shy during class – hanging back during group projects, sitting in the back row, or doing everything in his power to avoid being called on during class – he may be trying to hide a learning issue.

Acting up

It's also important to remember that hiding doesn't always look like what it is. In fact, for some kids it may look just the opposite. Where some students shrink down, hoping to go unnoticed, others act out, drawing attention away from deficits by becoming the class clown, being defiant, or pretending to be “too cool” to care how they're doing in school.

Missing homework

Students with learning disorders often struggle to get homework in on time – or at all. Homework troubles happen for a number of reasons.

- A child may feel embarrassed to hand in work that is incorrect or unfinished.
- Total wipe-out. Kids who struggle with memory and organization may have simply forgotten there was an assignment due at all.
- Lost! Even when homework *does* get done, it still has to make it from home to school .

Every kid is bound to miss an assignment once in a while, but if a student routinely fails to turn in her homework it's time to take a closer look at what's going on.

Timing troubles

Kids with learning disabilities often struggle with time management, transitions and organization. These timing troubles can cause problems both in school and at home. Tell-tale signs to watch for include:

- A child who always seems to take ‘too long’ to complete tasks – from assignments to putting on his shoes after gym.
- A student’s who’s parents report that it takes him hours to get through his homework at night.
- A kid who’s chronically late to school (I missed the bus – again!) or always seems to be rushing from one class to another.

Test Stress

Most kids will have test anxiety now and then, but if a student seems to have more trouble than expected it can be a clue that he has a learning disorder. Some things to watch for:

- A student who always ends up scrambling to finish the test on time – or routinely exceeds the time limit – regardless of reminders.
- A child who’s always the last one still working on a timed assignment.
- Very messy handwriting
- Serious pre-test anxiety
- A student who fails numerous tests despite having studied

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Emotionality

School can be an emotional minefield for students with learning disorders. From struggling to keep up with peers to falling behind on schoolwork, the opportunities to feel bad about themselves can be overwhelming.

- Kids with learning disorders often struggle with feelings of shame, embarrassment, and low-self esteem. If a child often seems to be down on himself, depressed, or frustrated at school, an undiagnosed learning disorder could be a cause.
- Kids with learning disorders may develop serious school-related anxiety. Especially before they are diagnosed, when they don’t understand why they keep up with their peers.
- Additionally, kids with learning disorders often struggle with “self-regulation,” meaning they lack the tools to manage and process emotions and are easily overwhelmed – which can lead to outbursts. For example, a student who flies off the handle when he’s asked to stay in his seat, or is reduced to tears when asked to try a challenging assignment.

Avoidance

Students with learning disorders often go to great lengths to avoid school situations that trigger anxiety or stress. Some signs of avoidance to watch for include:

- Excessive absences
- Staying home “sick” on days when there are tests or other important assignments
- Refusal to participate in challenging activities
- Making frequent trips to the bathroom or asking to go to the nurse when faced with stressful assignments or tests
- Cutting class, or skipping school entirely

Helping students with learning disabilities get the attention and support they need to do better and feel better will benefit that child– both in school and out – for years to come.

Read more: [Supporting the Emotional Needs of Kids With Learning Disabilities](#)

[How to Help Kids Talk About Learning Difficulties](#)

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