



Identifying Early Signs of a Learning Difference in Your Child

By Amy Cushner

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Educator Elizabeth Stone once wrote that having a child is “to decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body.” When children are hurt, parental emotions trigger a call to action. But what if the hurt is invisible? What if the struggle is not seen or the effects are not felt until years later? This is the path of a child with a learning difference.

A constitutional learning difference is a person with average to above average intelligence, who is at risk for failing when exposed to standard methods of education, due to neurological processing difficulties. This is not related to effort. Common learning differences are dyslexia (decoding, spelling), ADHD, oral language disorders, dysgraphia (handwriting) and dyscalculia (math). Learning Differences affect approximately 20 percent of the population or one in five children and adults. A learning difference is not overt or transparent like a skinned knee — unless the soft signs are present and the eye is trained to see them.

Early Signs

Dr. Sylvia Richardson, pediatrician, speech pathologist, Montessorian, former president of the International Dyslexia Association and advocate for early intervention of learning differences, said, “If you would identify children who are high risk for failure in academic learning tasks, with the goal of providing early intervention, evaluate: coordination, language, attention, perception, social-emotional.”

Delays in these areas during the critical developmental stage of birth to 6 are the early signs of a potential learning difference. Simply remember C-L-A-P-S. Delays, no matter the level of severity in any or all of these areas, can be acted on with early intervention. This is not new information. In 1902, James Hinchelwood was the first advocate of record to give the clarion call of action for early intervention. He said, “The sooner the nature of the child’s deficit is recognized, the better the chances of the child’s improvement.”

Time to Act

The conduit for a parent to understand and get help for these areas of child development can be a pediatrician, speech pathologist or early childhood educator. We can also build awareness and understanding of typical versus atypical child development through the use of online developmental charts and checklists or websites such as Understood.org. Podcasts from researchers like Dr. Sally Shaywitz address early signs of dyslexia. Intervention includes work with a speech-language pathologist, occupational therapist and attending a school that specializes in working with children at risk prior to kindergarten, such as Shelton’s Early Childhood.

Katrina De Hirsch, a pioneer in early learning disabilities, once wrote, “Our present-day knowledge is sufficient to clear the way for preventive work. We are undoubtedly able to pick out those youngsters in kindergarten who are liable to turn into dyslexic children. Exposing these particular youngsters to a different educational approach would eliminate much of the later-developing frustrations and disabilities.”

We are stewards of our children’s future, for they cannot make decisions regarding intervention. Our children cannot afford for us to “wait and see.”

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