

1

Introduction

The primary purpose of *Addressing Learning Disabilities and Difficulties: How to Reach and Teach Every Student* is to provide information and suggestions to parents, teachers, and administrators who work with and are concerned about children who have learning and performance problems in school. All children can learn; however, they differ in their abilities to learn, ways of learning, and methods of expressing what they have learned.

This handbook is designed for use as a guide by those who want to help children who have learning difficulties or learning disabilities. It strives to present information in clear and simple language. The content offers strategies that special education teachers, general education teachers, and parents can implement. These strategies can help reduce the frustration of teachers and parents and the failure of students; they can lessen the need for extensive assessment; and they can help children avoid the need for special education placement.

This introductory chapter considers the following subjects:

- Some background of difficulties with children's learning and performance
- Complexity of learning and performance difficulties
- Basic assumptions
- Current approaches to children's difficulties in learning and performance
- Uses, benefits, and limitations of *Addressing Learning Disabilities and Difficulties*
- The overall content and organization of this handbook and tips for using it

SOME BACKGROUND OF DIFFICULTIES WITH CHILDREN'S LEARNING AND PERFORMANCE

For many years, parents and teachers have been concerned about children who seem as though they should be doing better in school. Over the years,

2 ● Addressing Learning Disabilities and Difficulties

thinkers, researchers, and practitioners from education, psychology, and medicine have promoted a variety of explanations for poor achievement. The debates on what constitutes a learning disability continue to add confusion to the general applicability of research findings. The lack of consensus interferes with a clear understanding of conditions, such as, dyslexia, where different evidence seems to support a range of conflicting causes, including poor or inappropriate reading instruction and underlying neurological conditions.

Each new point of view and understanding about learning and behavior tends to give rise to a new procedure to ameliorate children's learning difficulties. A variety of teaching techniques, teaching materials, psychotherapeutic approaches, physical exercises, diets, medications, relaxation treatments, play therapies, art therapies, music therapies, and computer-aided instructions have been developed, prescribed, and tried with children. Children have been taught by college student tutors; by experienced teachers in small, medium, and large classes; and by teachers trained in special techniques of instruction. The effects of the treatments have been mixed. Some children benefited; others did not. Because children have such varied patterns of individual characteristics, it has been difficult to examine the research and come to any definite conclusion about what works across a broad spectrum of learning behaviors. What can a parent and teacher do? How can the child be assisted in learning and performing?

Contemporary research has emphasized the variety of ways in which children receive information, process it, learn it, and apply it. Other research has increased knowledge about effective learning elements and sequences and the strategies of effective learners. Combined, this knowledge has led to an emphasis on instructional approaches that favor identifying *different learning abilities in children* rather than focus on *learning disabilities within children*. Using an abilities approach, observations and interventions are focused on how an individual child works most effectively and what useful skills and strategies can be added to the child's repertory. In this way, instruction can be built around how an individual approaches, perceives, and acts on a skill and the interventions that can enhance learning.

Observation can build a collective understanding of a child's performance. Information gathered by parents and teachers can increase understanding about how a child plays and learns—when alone, in a small group, in a classroom, on the playground, on a school bus, at home, and in the neighborhood. What skills does the child demonstrate and in what settings? Which activities does the child enjoy and seek out and which are avoided? These observations provide opportunities to develop a well-rounded picture of the child based on observations by persons most familiar with the child's behavior.

Observation is aimed at recognizing ineffective learning or voids in learning before they lead to habitual inaccuracies or generalize into other

behaviors. Early observation and intervention is aimed at finding out *how and what* a child learns and *how and what* learning a child can demonstrate toward specific learning goals and standards. When a child's learning and performance is periodically measured and monitored, the teacher can determine the effectiveness of instruction and make changes. When this information is open to the child and the parent, they have information upon which to set personal goals and to judge the effectiveness of their efforts. In this context learning can become a collaborative adventure.

COMPLEXITY OF LEARNING AND PERFORMANCE DIFFICULTIES

Assessing the difference between academic underachievement and a learning disability or an attention deficit problem is difficult. Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that without expert assistance, teachers and parents cannot help all students, no matter how hard they (and the children) try. Some students do not seem to benefit from adaptations in general classroom instruction. These children may be referred for assessment. If a child is identified as having exceptional needs, he or she receives special education services to help overcome the effects of the disability. Terms commonly used to describe some of the learning disabilities are

- Dyslexia
- Developmental aphasia
- Attention deficit disorder
- Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder

The terms refer *not* to children but to a group or constellation of conditions. At times, the conditions occur in conjunction with other conditions, such as behavioral disorders, emotional disorders, or other health impairments in such combinations as to make them difficult to untangle.

Some students who struggle with class work, who do not seem to benefit from instructional adaptations, and who are referred for assessment may be determined to be ineligible for special education services. But even though these students are not eligible for special assistance, their teachers may be able to use the results of assessment and the accompanying recommendations to make useful changes in classroom instruction.

General education classrooms have always had students with a broad range of learning styles and behaviors, and teachers are accustomed to a variety of learning styles and skills. However, the changing school population, which contains students with an increasing diversity of backgrounds,

4 ● Addressing Learning Disabilities and Difficulties

languages, and cultures, poses additional challenges to educators. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires that students are educated in the least restrictive environment and this increases the variability within classrooms. Current trends foster teaching approaches that recognize and honor a wide variety of cultural and learning differences.

The No Child Left Behind law has mandated that all children are to be served by highly qualified teachers, an achievement that should improve all instruction. A shortage of qualified special education teachers has had a negative impact on special instruction as it has in other areas of instruction. Improvement in the quality of teaching should reduce learning problems that have resulted from poor instruction and poor class management. As knowledge about learning and behavior improves, so will the skills of teachers and parents who are called upon to help children who continue to struggle with learning.

BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

The material presented in *Addressing Learning Disabilities and Difficulties* is based on the following four assumptions:

1. All children want to learn.
2. Most misbehavior or poor academic performance is neither willful nor malicious.
3. Teachers want to teach effectively.
4. Parents want to understand and to support their children's learning.

The following five items are generally accepted concepts regarding the instruction of children:

1. No single general reading or instructional program meets the needs of all students.
2. Some students require additional instruction in reading, writing, and spelling to learn those basic skills.
3. Early identification of learning problems can reduce early school failure, loss of self-esteem, and persistent patterns of difficulty.
4. The middle school years are a time of critical change in the manner of instruction, the learning environment, and adolescent behavior.
5. Reasonable accommodations, as required by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), increase the chances that children who have difficulties will learn.

APPROACHES TO CHILDREN'S DIFFICULTIES IN LEARNING AND PERFORMANCE

Several labels, such as *learning disabled*, *neurologically handicapped*, *brain-injured*, *hyperactive*, *attention deficit*, or *learning disordered*, have been applied to children who perform poorly in school. Recently, the emphasis has shifted away from applying labels to understanding the variety of ways in which children receive information, process that information, and demonstrate that they have learned and can apply the information. This approach has been termed a *learning abilities* or *learning styles* approach in contrast to a *learning disability* approach.

School professionals who specialize in learning disabilities often use a learning abilities approach or a learning styles approach to education, and they encourage teachers, parents, and students to view learning problems from this point of view. The current approach also stresses early identification of the learning problem and early intervention. When learning problems are identified early in a student's academic career and classroom interventions begin immediately, failure can be averted before it becomes chronic, cloaked in frustration, and destructive to a student's self-esteem and motivation. Children who experience more successes than failures in school develop the confidence and persistence that lead to increased learning.

The identification of learning strengths and weaknesses in a student or a group of children can lead to the use of instructional strategies that are tailored toward individual needs. Information about learning strengths and weaknesses can provide parents with an understanding of the ways in which their child learns and the ways in which they can help their child at home. Individualized information can also provide a child with better self-understanding and help that child recognize personally effective learning strategies.

One important feature of effective instruction is the documentation of strategies that benefit a child's learning and behavior. Another feature is the maintenance of a record of a student's plans, accomplishments, and evaluations. Teachers save samples of a student's work, evaluations, and achievements. Parents can keep a folder that contains records of their child's learning needs, a history of the child's progress, and copies of his or her schoolwork. In many classes, students keep portfolios of their work so that they can demonstrate their proficiency and track the effect of changes in their study strategies. Such documentation of interventions and progress provides a basis for future plans.

Scientific, medical, and educational researchers are making steady progress in understanding the ways in which children and adults learn. Readers who want more information about specific learning difficulties or disabilities or about the latest research regarding multiple learning styles are

6 ● Addressing Learning Disabilities and Difficulties

encouraged to look into the professional literature in a school or public library. Information can also be obtained by speaking personally with knowledgeable professionals in the field and by searching the Internet site of the center or association dedicated to the disorder. The appendices of this handbook also provide useful information.

USES, BENEFITS, AND LIMITATIONS OF ADDRESSING LEARNING DISABILITIES AND DIFFICULTIES

Parents and educators can use this handbook to assist students who experience learning or behavioral difficulties in school. Because students do not learn or demonstrate what they have learned in the same ways, having a variety of teaching strategies and methods provides all students with opportunities to learn.

Uses

This handbook is designed to

1. Help parents and educators improve their understanding of the needs and the behaviors of students who have problems in learning or in school performance, including children who have learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, attention deficit disorder, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder
2. Promote effective instructional techniques for use with all children but especially for use with students who have problems in learning or performance
3. Provide references for information and resources that can assist parents, teachers, and administrators in improving the effectiveness of instruction and educational programs
4. Provide information on characteristic behaviors that can be used as a basis for screening students for difficulties in learning and in performance
5. Provide pertinent citations for the federal laws and regulations that apply to referral for assessment, determination of eligibility, and provision of special education and related services to children who have specific learning disabilities
6. Provide information about school practices that help all students succeed

Benefits

The information in this handbook and its application are intended to help provide a variety of benefits and positive outcomes for the following groups:

Students

Students will find that some of the information provided in this handbook refers to the learning situations that they experience in their classrooms. Students should think of the learning strategies provided in this text as possible avenues for self-help. When students believe that certain suggestions might help them learn, they should discuss these suggestions with their teachers or parents. Strategies might not be adopted exactly as they are presented in this guide because the strategies need to fit individual teaching and learning styles. In addition, a trial-and-error period often needs to take place before a successful strategy is discovered. The old adage “try, try again” represents a helpful attitude for both students and teachers. A learning difficulty or disability usually appears slowly over time, and solutions can be equally slow in developing.

Teachers

This handbook provides information about the characteristics of learning difficulties and disabilities. It provides descriptions of learning difficulties and suggests teaching strategies that relate to specific classroom skills and tasks. Because each teacher has his or her own interests, teaching style, and classroom situations, the intention of this handbook is to provide a variety of teaching strategies from which teachers can select the ones that best fit them and their students. The suggestions that appear in this text represent a starting point, and teachers will likely want to combine, modify, and otherwise adapt strategies to specific classroom needs.

Parents

Parents can use this handbook along with their existing knowledge of their child’s learning styles, behaviors, and feelings about school to assist their child at home and in working with school staff. It can be tempting to identify all the difficulties that a child exhibits and to overlook his or her areas of strength or the areas in which the child has no problems. To counterbalance these tendencies, parents can use the lists of strategies that are provided in Chapters 2 and 3 to discover and to highlight the areas in which no problems exist and the areas in which their child’s strengths can be used to improve learning. For example, a child who has good attentional and

8 ● Addressing Learning Disabilities and Difficulties

listening skills but poor reading skills can be helped to process information by listening to others read or by using audiotapes. A child who has good thinking skills but poor attentional skills might learn best by doing projects rather than by attempting paper-and-pencil tasks. Parents are often more aware of their child's interests and aptitudes than are school professionals. Parents can use their knowledge of their child's strengths and interests when they help their child with homework, and they can often help their child's teacher in discovering effective teaching avenues.

School Districts and School Leaders

This handbook can be used as a part of staff development programs for general education teachers and for other school personnel. It can be used to stimulate thoughtful, professional conversations about the ways in which a school and its faculty and staff can assist all students in succeeding in school. This handbook can also be used as a reference guide to help teachers and other school personnel understand individual students who have academic difficulties, apply successful interventions, and make appropriate referrals for further evaluation.

Administrators, consultants, supervisors, other professionals, and board members often face making decisions that affect unsuccessful students. This handbook can provide an understanding of the complexities encountered by teachers and parents who work to improve students' performances. This publication also provides information about the instructional steps that can help reduce a student's academic problems and improve his or her learning. In addition, it describes ways to organize instructional programs to meet the educational needs of students who are experiencing difficulties. Most of these students can be served exclusively by general education; however, some students will need additional support in the form of related services or special education.

Limitations

The strategies in this handbook are intended for use as procedures and tools that can assist teachers, parents, and administrators in effectively instructing all children and especially those children who fail to learn with standard group instruction. They have been drawn from the collective experience of many professionals and parents who have worked with students who have learning difficulties. Although it is comprehensive, *Addressing Learning Disabilities and Difficulties* does not include all available strategies nor does it include complete instructional programs that might be helpful to teachers, parents, and students. No single strategy will suit the unique

abilities and disabilities of all learners. Nor is there a particular service delivery model that will suit the particular assets and challenges of each school site. Because students have unique combinations of strengths, weaknesses, needs, and interests, different strategies may have to be tried before an appropriate intervention is found. If difficulties persist after parents and teachers have collaborated and after a school-level team of teachers and other education professionals have met and provided suggestions for modifying instruction or the student's behavior, then a formal, professional assessment may be needed. Some learning problems defy the best classroom strategies. No matter how hard a child, parent, or teacher may work on a problem, a student's failure to learn may continue. Even when a child who is formally tested does not meet eligibility criteria for receiving special education services, information gained through a formal assessment can provide suggestions for classroom instruction and home assistance. An effective assessment team can not only determine eligibility but can also identify a child's learning strengths and weaknesses. The team can determine potentially effective teaching strategies and can recommend other forms of assistance.

PARTS I AND II: THEIR CONTENT AND PURPOSE

The main body of the handbook is divided into two sections. Part I, "Learning Difficulties and Teaching Strategies," examines the characteristics of children who have general learning difficulties; the difficulties and strategies related to learning skills; and the difficulties and strategies related to performance skills. Part II contains a chapter on referring students to special education and the eligibility of students who have learning disabilities. It also examines the individualized education program (IEP) process and the options for service delivery.

The purpose of Part I is to

1. promote knowledge of classroom strategies that have been used successfully with children who have difficulty learning,
2. enable special and general education teachers to select strategies that are appropriate to the needs of specific students and to adjust teaching styles to classroom situations,
3. provide an understanding of the difficulties and strategies related to learning skills and performance skills.

10 ● Addressing Learning Disabilities and Difficulties

The purpose of Part II is to

1. clarify the process of referral, assessment, eligibility, and parental involvement and
2. help parents and educators understand the IEP process, service delivery options, and the role of the school site.

The three resources at the end of this handbook provide the following information:

Resource A: A brief discussion of the characteristics of learning disabilities, dyslexia, attention disorders, and behavior problems

Resource B: Addresses to selected Internet sites for readers who want additional information about the topics examined in *Addressing Learning Disabilities and Difficulties*

Resource C: A list of public agencies, foundations, centers, parent organizations, and state and national professional organizations through which help may be obtained for persons who have learning disabilities in their families

In addition, a glossary of terms that appear in this handbook, in federal and state laws, and in regulations has been included along with a section on selected references for further reading.

WAYS TO USE THIS HANDBOOK

Addressing Learning Disabilities and Difficulties is meant to assist professionals and parents who are interested in the instruction of children who have learning difficulties and learning disabilities. It can be opened at any section and used to facilitate understanding and instruction; however, to gain a full appreciation of learning difficulties and disabilities, professionals and parents should read this handbook in its entirety. (Readers may wish to refer to the glossary if they encounter a term with which they are unfamiliar.)

The following sequence suggests a method for using *Addressing Learning Disabilities and Difficulties* to move from the recognition of a problem to the application of a strategy:

1. Record observations of a student's learning and performance strengths and weaknesses.

2. Select and employ the strategies suggested in the sections of Chapter 1 titled “Characteristics of Learning and Performance Difficulties” and “Accommodations and Modifications” to improve students’ general learning or performance skills.
3. Determine the areas of a student’s learning or performance skills to be improved by using in-class observations. Read the pertinent sections in Chapters 2 or 3 and select appropriate strategies of instruction.
4. Work with one of the student’s learning or performance skills and record the results of the actions that you have taken.
5. Record the strategies as you use them.
6. Discard the actions that do not produce results after a reasonable trial period. Start again with Step 2 and repeat the process until success is achieved.

The formatting in Chapters 2 and 3—which contain descriptions of characteristics typically seen in students who have learning difficulties and suggested strategies for teaching these students—allows the reader to reproduce pages that relate to a single instructional topic. In this way, specific information can be inserted into a class planning book or among homework references. The topics can be used for professional discussions, as planning aids by a teacher and a parent, as a focal point for teacher collaboration, or as material for staff development activities.

An Intervention Plan work sheet is provided at the end of each chapter that contains teaching strategies. The work sheet may be reproduced and is designed to assist the reader in matching strategies with instructional objectives and in selecting strategies that could be used with an entire class or that are appropriate for an individual child.

In this handbook, references are made frequently to federal laws and regulations. In the case of IDEA 2004, for which regulations have not yet been formulated, the law itself is referenced. Until those regulations are formulated and approved, regulations from IDEA 1997 are in effect. Examples of original citations and the abbreviated forms of citations used within the text appear as follows:

- *Code of Federal Regulations, Title 34, Section 300.7(c)(10)*, revised as of July 1, 2000, is reported as 34 *CFR* 300.7(c)(10).

SUMMARY

This handbook provides information about learning difficulties that educators and parents encounter in general education classrooms, special education

12 ● Addressing Learning Disabilities and Difficulties

programs, or in the home. The strategies that are presented in Part I of this handbook are based on the underlying assumptions that children want to learn and can learn and that teachers and parents want to help. This handbook can assist special education teachers and general education teachers, parents, and other education professionals in their search for effective instructional strategies. Children whose problems persist in a general education setting after team efforts and attempts at interventions have been made should be considered for referral to special education. The process of referral, the determination of eligibility, and the delivery of services are the core topics of Part II of this handbook. The intention of *Addressing Learning Disabilities and Difficulties* is to give teachers and parents the tools that they need to provide students with improved instructional and behavioral services.