

## **Learning Differences** a Few Important Facts

By Kathy Sherman

Each child who has a learning disability is unique and will have a different combination of strengths and weaknesses. All types of learning differences encompass one common aspect—the neurological processing of some type of input and the subsequent appropriate output based on the tasks involved. Unfortunately, the early indicators of a learning disability are often overlooked and the attending adults may make the mistake of assuming a child is experiencing a developmental delay and will ‘grow out of’ the problem. Although this may be true on occasion, it is rarely the case.

The three most common types of learning differences that will be discussed briefly here are dyslexia (which primarily affects reading, spelling, and writing), auditory/verbal processing, and difficulties involving non-verbal processing skills. It’s also not uncommon for an individual to have aspects of more than one. Issues involving dyslexia tend to be more prevalent and readily observable.

**Dyslexia**—As is true for all types of learning disabilities, dyslexia encompasses a range of issues and can be very mild to very severe. Behaviors that may be present with children who are dyslexic:

- difficulty with phonemic awareness (phonemic awareness—defined generally as the ability to perceive and manipulate individual sounds (and syllables) within words. It is a fundamental skill for the acquisition of reading and spelling skills)
- tendency to mix up syllables as a young child when speaking
- delayed language development—(word retrieval, following directions, or general language skills)
- fine motor delays/gross motor delays
- difficulty with certain types of memory such as math facts and facts that may lack context and rely more on rote memory (biology, chemistry)
- sequencing of math steps and processes
- difficulty sounding out words and with spelling (not necessarily spelling tests)
- phonemic awareness—defined generally as the ability to perceive and manipulate individual sounds (and syllables) within words. It is a fundamental skill for the acquisition of reading and spelling skills.

**Auditory/verbal processing**—This area is sometimes referred to simply as ‘auditory processing or central auditory processing disorder’. This area is often not identified early enough or adequately. Because most educational environments are language based—for both input and output—the stress and frustration these students can experience is significant. Behaviors that may be present with children with problems in the auditory/verbal processing area are:

- delayed early language development in general
- difficulty processing and remembering language-based information
- difficulty expressing self or making a point easily

- difficulty restating a story and following a series of directions
- often says “what” a lot
- reads accurately for word recognition and sounding out words but has poor reading comprehension
- may experience more than average fatigue at the end of a school day
- may be sensitive to loud noises, have difficulty listening with any background noise

**Non-verbal Learning disabilities**— This area typically involves the ability of a child to accurately interpret nonverbal social cues such as facial expression or body language. However, some individuals with a nonverbal learning disability only have difficulty with mathematics and, some have a combination of the two. Behaviors that may be present with children who have problems with non-verbal processing are:

- strong vocabulary skills, tendency to recall factual information well
- difficulty with comprehension beyond the literal, factual questions involving inference and ‘reading between the lines’.
- may misinterpret the behaviors of others
- may be clumsy, less coordinated than peers
- tendency to have difficulty with transitions
- spatial difficulties—may get confused going from place to place or take more time than other students to maneuver from place to place even if it is routine.

**The case for early evaluation**—The purpose of evaluating children is not to attach a label regarding their learning issues but to direct the adults toward a plan of effective intervention. The importance of early intervention cannot be stressed enough. The longer a child experiences difficulty in adequately managing academic expectations, the larger the emotional impact those feelings of frustration and low self esteem become and the harder the academic remedial work will be. Untangling all of these components later can be extremely difficult especially as the child moves toward adolescence and may tend to adopt inappropriate coping behaviors.