



Advocating for your child: An Introduction for Parents

Guidelines for Accepting Your Child's Learning Disability

- Your child's Learning Disability (LD) is not your fault.
- Acknowledge that the learning disability exists and is just one part of your healthy child.
- Understand that your child is a capable person; he just learns differently than others.
- Together with the school, you can find ways for your child to perform better at school.

Parents as Advocates

An advocate is a person who speaks up for, acts on behalf of, or supports someone else. As a parent, you are the best person to advocate for your child because you know his strengths and needs, likes and dislikes. Unconditional love is a powerful motivator, and it's been proven time and again that the squeaky wheel gets the grease. But how you squeak will determine how much grease you get!

Parents often report a gut feeling that their child learns differently than other children. Many parents say they are relieved to discover that their child has a learning disability because they knew something wasn't quite right. Parents who bring these feelings to their family doctor, to their child's teacher and to school administrators may not be treated receptively. Try not to be discouraged. You know in your heart that you must speak up for your child. If you don't, who will?

To be an effective advocate, you should:

- Develop the confidence to do your own advocating.
- Develop problem solving techniques to overcome obstacles.
- Find the information to make appropriate decisions.
- Take appropriate actions.
- Support your child's efforts towards independence.
- Learn what your rights are and what your child's rights are
- Use effective communication in advocating for your rights
- Analyze problems and pinpoint areas of responsibility learn about community resources and agencies network with other parents and groups for mutual support and connect with your local Learning Disability Association (LDA).

Guidelines for Parent Advocates

- 1.Understand the extraordinary time commitment involved in advocacy efforts.
- 2.Recognize that if you don't advocate for your child, no one else will.
- 3.Recognize your limits and capacity to advocate; seek out advocacy allies.
- 4.Model advocacy skills for your child.
- 5.Use information as a powerful tool for understanding the puzzle of your child's Learning Disability.

Action Steps

- Take the child to the family doctor or pediatrician for a complete physical examination to rule out poor vision or hearing loss.
- Arrange a meeting with your child's teacher about academic, behavior or social performance concerns that you share. How does the school describe his/her problem? What actions does the school suggest?
- Start a file or a loose leaf binder with comments from all your sources of information. Consider this your central filing system for documenting what is happening with your child's learning. Make brief summary notes after each conversation or meeting, stating action steps that were agreed upon and so on. Be sure to date your notes for quick reference later. Keep a copy of every letter you send and receive concerning your child's learning environment and emotional help.

Assessments:

The Ministry of Education funds school boards to provide assessment services. Only a qualified registered psychologist or psychological associate can conduct a formal psychological assessment. The assessment process may be initiated by a parent or on the recommendations of school staff. A psychological assessment cannot take place without the written consent of the parent.

Private assessments can be very costly. Parents should inquire if their private medical insurance will cover any of the costs. Psychological assessments can be used as a deduction under medical expenses on parents' income tax.

To find a psychologist who is experienced in educational testing and who specializes in learning disabilities in children, contact the Ontario College of Psychologists. You can also contact your local L.D.A for recommendations. Finally check the yellow pages under "Psychologists" and look for someone who specifically offers psycho-educational testing, or services to children and adolescents.

There are three purposes of an assessment:

1. To find out if the child has a Learning Disability
2. To identify the child's strengths and needs and
3. To identify appropriate support programs and services to meet his/her individual needs.

As you enter the assessment process, be encouraged that all three of these purposes are working for your child, not against him/her. The assessment should provide answers as to why your child is experiencing difficulties and what can be done to help.

The assessment will likely include:

1. An initial interview with you (with or without your child) to gather birth history, early childhood experiences, and general information on his difficulties. This is a good opportunity to ask questions about what tests will be done and why. Bring your questions written down so that you won't forget something really important. Invite your child to voice his/her questions too.
2. An interview with the child's teacher. The assessor may observe the child in the classroom and in the playground.
3. A review of your child's academic records to get a framework for academic performance prior to testing.
4. A battery of tests. When the tests are complete, the psychologist will draw up a complete and detailed report. This report will describe the child's learning achievements and abilities, state definitely whether or not there is a learning disability, and if so, what it is and what effects it produces. It will also make recommendations as to how the child might achieve greater success in learning.

Now it's time to start finding out what the recommendations really mean for your child. For example, what is a special education class or withdrawal help twice a week? By law, appropriate services must be provided to your child. Ask your school principal for the school board's Parent Guide on special education. Ask for clarification from the principal of your child's school or your local LDA if you don't understand the guide.

Guidelines for the Assessment Process

- Ask questions and take notes.
- Take courage not to feel intimidated by experts: You are the expert when it comes to parenting your child.
- Trust your instincts and work at being positive.
- The assessment is the first step in getting your child the help he needs and deserves.

Depending on how a school board conducts its Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (I.P.R.C.) the meeting could be very short or could take some time. Some school boards hold a pre IPRC meeting or case conference. This is where most of the discussion happens. However, by the end of the I.P.R.C., hopefully there is general agreement about the identification and placement for your child.

Try not to panic if the recommended placement is at a school out of your community or if the school will be withdrawing him from the regular classroom for special help everyday. Keep in mind that your child may have been unhappy and unsuccessful in the regular program; this whole process has been about finding new strategies and about getting him the help he needs.

You will be asked to sign a document saying that you are in agreement with the decision of the meeting. If it satisfies you, sign it. But if you have any doubts, you should take a few days to think about what happened at the meeting before signing the document or deciding what your next steps will be.

You may find it comforting to know that, as a parent, you have the following rights:

- the right to seek the best possible education for your child;
- the right to request information from your child's school file (Ontario School Record);
- the right to have a person other than the child's other parent attend meetings with you;
- the right to appeal if you are not satisfied with your child's school placement.

Guidelines for Preparing for an I.P.R.C.

- Find out who will attend and what their roles are.
- Ask your school principal for possible options that may be recommended at the I.P.R.C.
- Take time to consider what you'd like the outcome of the meeting to be.
- Bring your questions written down for quick reference.
- Make sure you attend with another adult. They may be helpful for note taking.
- Keep an open mind during the process
- Voice your concerns in a constructive manner.

Placement Options

Regular classroom: The student is kept within an age-appropriate class. The classroom teacher is responsible for monitoring progress. The child receives no special support outside the regular class.

Ask:

- What accommodations will be offered?
- How will his identified special needs be met?
- Will he be given pre-teaching review or pre-teaching of skills and concepts?
- What training has the teacher received to address my child's needs?

- How will his progress be monitored?
- How will this class situation be different from his previous class before he was considered exceptional?

Modified program in the regular classroom setting: This is sometimes called an adaptive program.

Ask:

- What percentage of his subjects will be modified?
- How will his program now differ from the regular class?
- Will my child cover the same curriculum as the rest of the class so that at the end of the year he will have covered the curriculum for his grades?
- Who will do the modifying?
- Does this mean a watered down program?
- Will my child need a modified program during all his school years?
- Will this modified program be recognized in order for him to graduate into high school?

Resource person within the regular classroom setting: The student remains within the regular classroom and receives help from a resource teacher or teacher's aid in weak subject areas. As the regular teacher teaches the rest of the class, the resource teacher and student work either one-on-one or with other students in a small group.

Ask:

- Will the resource teacher work on the same material with my child, as the rest of the class is working on?
- Will my child be doing math, for example, at the same time as his peers do math or will he be missing the subject that is being taught to the rest of the class?
- Will my child feel uncomfortable being singled out for special instruction?
- Will there be more than one child working with the resource teacher?
- Will my child be able to learn without being distracted by the other lesson being taught?
- What are the logistical details for this approach?
- What qualifications does this resource person have?
- How are outcomes measured?

Resource room help on a part-time basis: The child is withdrawn from the regular class for special instructions (e.g. 45 minutes a day - twice a week) one-on-one or in a group.

Ask:

- How big is the group, and will they all be from the same class or grade?
- What will my child be missing in the regular classroom, and what will be put into place for him to catch up on what he is missing while withdrawn from the class?
- How will this program meet my child's identified special needs?
- How will outcomes be measured?

Placement in a self-contained special education class: The student is a member of a much smaller special education class. The maximum pupil teacher ratio for pupils with severe learning disabilities is 8:1. This ratio is found in Regulation 298, section 31(a).

Ask:

- Is the class solely for children with learning disabilities or are there children with social difficulties and children with developmental delays as well?
- How will this program meet his identified special needs?
- How long will my child need this special class?
- What are the qualifications of the teacher?
- Will my child be integrated with other children for less academic subjects (e.g. physical education).
- Will my child be involved in the regular life of the school (e.g. choir, clubs)?
- Will my child be viewed by other children as being different as a result of being placed in this class?
- Will my child be integrated into the regular program as his academic subjects become stronger?
- Are there children of his same gender in this smaller class?

Appealing the I.P.R.C. Process

If you are not happy with your child's identification, and/or placement, you can appeal the decision of the I.P.R.C. You can get information on the appeal procedure from your parent guide book on special education and/or your local Learning Disability Association can provide you with information and advocacy support. Many parents who have appealed an I.P.R.C. decision are willing to assist other parents in this process.

Stress and Self Esteem

Children with learning disabilities (LD) live with chronic stress. Not only do they find it difficult to do tasks such as read and write, sequence thoughts and numbers, organize possessions etc. but everyone around them seems to do these things so effortlessly. One of the ways parents can help with their child's stress is to acknowledge it. Give the child opportunities to talk about his frustrations and fears so that he can express himself in words, instead of by lashing out physically at siblings or classmates or by withdrawing and exhibiting an unwillingness to express his concerns.

A sense of humor can do wonders to ease the stress in family life. Being teased in public can be damaging to self-esteem, but being gently teased by loving family members often helps the child feel secure. Try to have some fun with your child every day whether it's reading the comics or sharing an amusing incident. A child with a learning disability really enjoys hearing about times when his parents were klutzy or forgot to take something to the office. All of a sudden his experience is normalized by the fact that successful adults make mistakes too. You may find your child with a learning disability especially empathetic to you when you have something difficult to do in your day.

Guidelines for the Family Side of Helping your Child's Learning

- Know that you will go through a series of grieving stages.
- Make your acceptance of your child's learning disability your goal.
- Document conversations and events as they occur, no matter how small they seem at the time.
- With your child, set up reasonable homework routines.
- Build on strengths through extra-curricular activities.
- Talk with your child about his learning disability and listen closely to him.

Guidelines for Helping Your Child Advocate for Himself

- Work at accepting the fact that your child has a learning disability for life.
- Show your child that you know he's capable and intelligent.
- Speak up for your child when you think he needs you.
- Encourage your child to speak up for himself whenever possible
- Become comfortable describing his learning disability so that others understand.

Tips for nurturing self-advocacy skills

- I. Let him answer for himself whenever he is asked a question.
- II. Help him rehearse his response to "What is your learning disability?"
- III. Ask for his opinion and take his advice.
- IV. Expect him to do chores around the house like his siblings.
- V. Ensure that he's accountable for his actions, especially homework, and commitments to friends.
- VI. Let him see that adults feel vulnerable too.
- VII. Acknowledge and comment in a positive manner when he makes appropriate choices and reacts in a positive way.
- VIII. Tell him he's special and that you love him just the way he is.
- IX. When he does something courageous, tell him you're proud of him.
- X. Role play ways to handle tough situations at school.
- XI. Explore realistic career options with him.
- XII. Be available when he wants to talk and validate his feelings of being different.
- XIII. Provide a safety net for him so that he feels secure enough to take risks like trying out for team sports, looking after a neighbors pet, or spending two months' allowance on a toy he's been wanting.
- XIV. Make sure he understands his rights and responsibilities.
- XV. Let him experience the joy of helping someone else.
- XVI. Give him plenty of hugs so that he feels your support physically and emotionally.
- XVII. Give him opportunities to make decisions for himself, even seemingly small decisions show him there are consequences to his actions and that it's fun to be in charge of what happens next.
- XVIII. Assure him that he is not dumb or stupid.
- XIX. Give him permission to take a break when he needs time to relax.
- XX. Help him see the humour in some of the things he can't do so that he can start to take himself just a little less seriously.

A Child's Best Advocate is an Informed Parent