

Early Signs of Learning Challenges

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Tips that young kids might need support to thrive

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My daughter, age four, has been trying to write the number five. She wants to make a birthday card for a friend. “No, that’s not right…” she mutters, her squiggles snaking across the page. On attempt number six, frustration gets the better of her. “I just can’t do this!” she wails, throwing her pen to the floor. “Fives are too hard

This is hardly unusual for a preschooler just starting to learn numbers and letters (and who still sometimes flops to the ground in distress if her banana accidentally breaks in half) but I can’t help feeling a little pang of worry.

Growing up, I had dysgraphia and dyscalculia. Seeing my daughter struggle, I wonder how I’ll know if she has learning challenges of her own. When children have learning issues, early intervention can be a big help. But how can parents tell if, and when, to be concerned?

What is a learning disability?

Learning disorders (LD’s) are diagnosed when a child is having serious trouble with a specific academic skill or subject, like math or reading. LDs are defined by a gap between what it is developmentally expected for a child to be able to do, and what they’re actually able to do. For example, a child who has no trouble keeping up with their peers in other ways but is falling way behind in reading.

Though some disorders, like autism, can, and often are diagnosed during a child’s preschool and early school years, learning disorders usually don’t become apparent until kids are a bit older – when they’ve had a chance to be exposed to formal schooling.

This is partially because when it comes to early learning, kids develop skills at different speeds. A child who seems to be behind their peers when it comes to forming letters or reading short words may just need a little time to catch up. Being at the younger – or older – end of the class can mean some children are little ahead or

behind other students. And, just like adults, different kids have different strengths and weaknesses. One child might excel at counting but struggle to write their name, while another might be reading basic words early on but have trouble with numbers. As they grow and mature their abilities usually even out.

For some children, however, those early learning struggles may signal future academic difficulties. And though kids may be too young for a formal *diagnosis*

in the preschool and early kindergarten years, support and, if necessary, early intervention can have big benefits. Daryaneh Badaly, PhD, a clinical neuropsychologist at the Child Mind Institute, explains that there are a few signs parents can be on the lookout for during children's early learning years.

The earliest signs of learning challenges

"In younger kids, learning challenges don't look the same as they do for older children, because the work they're being asked to do is very minimal," explains Dr. Badaly. "That said, there are some specific issues that may suggest a child is struggling with some specific early skills."

Fine motor control: "Issues with fine motor control can come out early on. You might see children struggling to learn how to hold a crayon correctly, having trouble using utensils, or shying away even from coloring or drawing shapes because it's physically hard for them," says Dr. Badaly. "Catching those issues early gives parents the chance to put supports like occupational therapy in place to strengthen those skills so they don't become a barrier to learning later on."

Language problems: Trouble understanding or using language can be a sign that a child may later be diagnosed with a language-based *learning disorder*.

"There are different functions of language that can be impaired," says Dr. Badaly. Children can have issues with receptive language, meaning they have a difficult time understanding words they're hearing or reading. Or they can struggle with expressive language – trouble using words to express themselves. Children can also have issues with both. "If a kid is having trouble understanding oral language or expressing themselves, intervention can be helpful," she says.

Early reading skills: Though most children are barely reading basic words during the preschool years, they're building the skills that form the building blocks of reading in other ways. "There's a lot of play with sounds, like rhyming games, or word and sound matching during this time," says Dr. Badaly. "If a child is really struggling to pick up on the sounds, or doesn't seem to grasp rhyming, that's someone you should watch a bit more closely."

Early math skills: “When kids are just learning to count, if the numbers just don’t come that easily to them, or they’re not seeming to grasp the fundamentals of counting, like putting things in order, that might be something to watch,” says Dr. Badaly. Issues with numbers can become especially clear around first grade, she explains: “If by the end of first grade a child wasn’t really grasping the basic concept of addition, that would definitely be cause for concern.”

Behavioral clues: If you notice your child frequently gets frustrated or upset during a certain activity, like drawing shapes or building with blocks, that may be a sign that the skills required for that type of learning are a challenge for them. “If there’s something that a kid is unwilling to do or is getting really upset when they’re asked to do it, it’s probably because it’s hard,” Dr. Badaly says. The question, she says, becomes: Why is it hard? “Is it that they haven’t been taught this skill? Or is it because the child is having a hard time staying focused, or because the task itself is hard?”

ADHD symptoms: Another behavioral clue worth considering during the early years is signs of ADHD. Though *ADHD*

is considered a behavioral disorder, it has a big impact on how kids learn, and many children with ADHD have learning disorders as well. “In preschool, even though we likely wouldn’t make a diagnosis of something like ADHD, if you have a kid who’s bouncing off the walls and can’t sit still, you might say, well this kid might end up being diagnosed with ADHD, and might benefit from a behavioral intervention,” Dr. Badaly notes.

What parents can do

For children struggling with fine motor control, or receptive or expressive language, specific help is available.

Children, even very young children, with fine motor issues may benefit from seeing an occupational therapist (OT). OT’s can work with kids to improve their grasp, muscle tone, and hand-eye coordination, and help children build their social and self-regulation skills.

If you notice your child is having speech or language issues, or has delayed speech, make an appointment with their healthcare provider. Your child’s doctor may ask for a hearing test and check your child’s throat and reflexes to rule out any other causes before suggesting next steps. If it seems like early intervention is necessary, your child may be referred to a speech-language pathologist (SLP) who will help them work on communication.

Speech and motor issues (especially when also seen with social challenges) can also be signs of autism, which, unlike learning disorders, “can be accurately diagnosed during early childhood,” says Dr. Badaly, “and early detection and intervention can be extremely beneficial.” If you, or your child’s teacher or doctor, notice your child is showing some of the early signs of autism, make an appointment to have them evaluated by a professional.

What parents can do at home

Supporting your child’s learning outside the classroom is key. Simple activities like reading, counting, or drawing together can help kids practice skills in a low-stress environment. “Taking time to build enjoyment of reading by letting your child choose the books you read together” can help, says Dr. Badaly, “Or even just helping them get used to how a book works, here’s the title, here’s the story.” Likewise, “math practice can be as simple as counting the apples when you’re making a pie together.”

The point, she explains, is to make learning feel more natural and less fraught. “All practice is good.” But she warns, parents should be careful not to overwhelm kids. “You really want to approach learning in a fun and enthusiastic way instead of turning it into work, which can backfire and make kids feel less engaged, not more.”

Supporting kids’ self-esteem

Learning differences can wreak havoc on kids’ confidence. If you suspect your child is struggling in school, supporting their self-esteem can be a huge help, whether or not they’re ever diagnosed with an LD. Learn more here about how help kids with learning challenges build self-esteem, gain confidence, and learn the skills they need to be more resilient when setbacks happen.