

Specific learning difficulties

Factsheet for parents and teachers

About this factsheet

This is one in a series of factsheets for parents, teachers and young people entitled *Mental Health and Growing Up*. The aims of these factsheets are to provide practical, up-to-date information about mental health problems (emotional, behavioural and psychiatric disorders) that can affect children and young people. This factsheet explores what a specific learning difficulty is, and gives advice on where and how to get help for young people affected by a specific learning difficulty and their families.

Introduction

What is a specific learning difficulty?

A child with a specific learning difficulty is as able as any other child, except in one or two areas of their learning. For instance, they may find it difficult to recognise letters, or to cope with numbers or reading.

There are many different types of specific learning disability, but the best known is probably dyslexia. In dyslexia, the child has difficulty with written symbols. Although these children are generally intelligent, they have difficulty with reading and spelling. It may be difficult for parents and teachers to realise that a child has this sort of problem, especially if their development has appeared quite normal in the early years. Often, the child will appear to understand, have good ideas, and join in storytelling and other activities as well as other children and better than some. Sometimes it can take years for adults to realise that a child has a specific difficulty.

What effect does it have?

Specific difficulties can make lessons hard for a child to understand. They will have a hard time keeping up with classmates, and may come to see themselves as stupid, or no good. They find it hard to concentrate on lessons and, because they cannot follow them properly, they find lessons 'boring'. The child will often search for other ways to pass the time and to succeed. They may try to avoid doing schoolwork because they find it impossible to do it well.

Doing badly in school can undermine their self-confidence. This can make it harder for the child to get along with other children and to keep friends. They may become the clown of the class because it is better than being 'stupid'. Children with specific reading difficulties often become

angry and frustrated, so behavioural problems are common. If they don't get suitable help, the problems may get worse (see Factsheet 4 on behavioural and conduct problems). Older children may drop out, fail exams or get into serious trouble – both at school and outside.

What can help?

Remedial education is a special programme of learning where the child's difficulties are taken into account. This helps a great deal. The Education Act 1990 means that all education authorities must identify which children have special educational needs and make sure that they get the remedial help that they require. Schools have a new 'Code of Practice', drawn up by the Department for Education and Skills, to help them to recognise and help children with this type of problem. The Department has also produced a helpful Guide for Parents (see sources of further information at the end of this factsheet).

A child with learning difficulties should have their needs properly assessed by their school. If you think this may be necessary, you should talk to the teacher about your concerns. If problems continue, the child may need to be assessed by an educational psychologist. If the learning problem seems to be associated with hyperactivity, behavioural problems (see Factsheets 4 and 5 on behavioural and conduct problems, and hyperactivity for further information) or problems with coordination, extra help may be needed.

Official assessment of a child under the Education Act 1990 will take account of the views of the parents as well as those of professionals. Once the assessment has taken place, the educational department will prepare a **Statement of Special Educational Needs**, which will

Sources of further information

- Advisory Centre for Education: 1c Aberdeen Studios, 22–24 Highbury Grove, London N5 2DQ; tel: 020 7354 8321; advice line 0808 800 5793; fax: 020 7354 9069; www.ace-ed.org.uk.
- British Dyslexia Association: 98 London Road, Reading, Berkshire R61 5AU; tel: 01734 662677; helpline 0118 966 8271; e-mail info@dyslexiahelp-bda.demon.co.uk; www.bda-dyslexia.org.uk.
- The Department for Education (Northern Ireland) has produced *Special Educational Needs – A Guide for Parents* (www.deni.gov.uk), a helpful guide to the statementing process and source of useful addresses. Tel: 0845 902 2260.
- IPSEA (Independent Panel for Special Educational Advice) gives information and second opinions for special educational needs. 6 Carlow Mews, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 1E; helplines: England & Wales 0800 0184016; Scotland (ISEA) 0131 665 4396; Northern Ireland 028 90 705654; www.ipsea.org.uk. Tel: 01394 382814.
- The YoungMinds Parents' Information Service provides information and advice on child mental health issues. 102–108 Clerkenwell Road, London EC1M 5SA; Parents' Information Service 0800 018 2138; www.youngminds.org.uk.
- The *Mental Health and Growing Up* series contains 36 factsheets on a range of common mental health problems. To order the pack, contact Book Sales at the Royal College of Psychiatrists, 17 Belgrave Square, London SW1X 8PG; tel: 020 7235 2351, ext. 146; fax: 020 7245 1231; e-mail: booksales@rcpsych.ac.uk, or you can download them from www.rcpsych.ac.uk.

describe what type of remedial help the child will benefit from.

A detailed assessment of the child's difficulties should be made if they are struggling more than normal with school work, especially if there are difficulties with:

- reading, writing or arithmetic
- understanding and following instructions, remembering what they have just been told
- telling left from right, e.g. confusing '25' with '52', 'b' with 'd', or 'on' with 'no'
- coordination or clumsiness, e.g. in using a pencil, doing buttons, tying shoe-laces or in sports
- their idea of time, e.g. confusing 'yesterday', 'today' and 'tomorrow'.

If you think your child may have specific learning difficulties, remember, you can request an assessment of special educational needs. Speak to the child's school. Talking to your child's teacher about your concerns is a good place to start.

If you feel that your child's learning problem has resulted in emotional or behaviour

problems, due to frustration or loss of self-confidence, you may need more specialised help. Your child's school will be able to advise you about this. Your general practitioner will also be able to help and, if necessary, refer you to your local child and adolescent mental health service. This service includes child psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, psychotherapists and specialist nurses who will be able to offer help and support.

References

- Carr, A. (ed.) (2000) *What Works with Children and Adolescents? A Critical Review of Psychological Interventions with Children, Adolescents and their Families*. London: Brunner-Routledge.
- Melville, J. & Subotsky, F. (1992) Problems at school in *My Child Needs Help? A Guide for Worried Parents*. London: Optima.
- Rutter, M. & Taylor, E. (eds) (2002) *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* (4th edn). London: Blackwell.
- Scott, A., Shaw, M. & Joughin, C. (2001) *Finding the Evidence: A Gateway to the Literature in Child and Adolescent Mental Health* (2nd edn). London: Gaskell.