



COPE!

Learning disability?

P&C gives you nine simple tips to put your pre-schooler on the right track..

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Albert Einstein, Winston Churchill, Walt Disney and even Tom Cruise suffered learning disabilities. A person is said to have a learning disability when he has to take copious efforts to perform a task, which is otherwise done effortlessly by someone belonging to a similar age-group. It can be difficulty with reading (dyslexia), writing (dysgraphia) or math (dyscalculia). Some people also encounter specific challenges with language, fine and gross motor skills. It certainly does not imply that these people are not intelligent. In fact, quite to the contrary, their challenge with

one skill is usually over-compensated by strength in another. It is just that the brain is wired to perceive and process differently, which requires that parents and teachers work with them using special tools and techniques and not adopt a straightforward approach to teaching.

Parenting a child with a learning disability can prove to be a daunting task. Everyday tasks at home assume a different magnitude, requiring strategic interventions. There is no 'one size fits all' here, since the nature of the problem

can vary from child to child and hence consulting a specialist helps. However, here are a few practical tips which can help guide you through the challenges...

EFFECTIVE USE OF ART: This works well for children who lack in verbal communication but are better at visual learning. Communicating new concepts can be an uphill task with them and artistic expression is a method employed successfully. For example, how do you explain the words morning, noon, evening and night? One way is by drawing a scenario on a sheet of paper. Engage them with provoking questions such as 'What is the colour of the morning sky?', 'What do you find each member in the family doing in the morning?', 'Who are the people you meet at that hour?' (Newspaper delivery man, milk man, friends in the school bus, perhaps...). Similarly, to describe the different rooms in the house, you can use play-doh to make replicas of the

rooms. While modelling a living room, encourage your child to do the exercise sitting in a different room to check if he can recollect the things observed. A good follow-up would also be to click some pictures of your play-doh models and clip or paste them on your child's wall. Nothing like a picture to re-inforce what you have already discussed.

LEARNING THE ALPHABET: Parents can sometimes get extremely worked up by comparing how many letters their little one can write versus the neighbour's child. The trick is to remind oneself that no one is going to grow up without learning the alphabet. A few months here or there is not going to be life altering. The gradual way to work on this is to first get your child to work on his pincer grip and colouring with crayons is the most basic and engaging way to begin this – doodling and scribbling with a crayon counts too. Writing on harder surfaces sits better on the mind, so a doodle pad is a good



tool to learn writing on. Many children often get confused with letters like C and draw a mirror image. Using a rough surface like sandpaper or a handful of rice grains spread out on a plate is a great way to practice.

SPEECH AND LANGUAGE: Some children suffer from challenges with speech; do not ignore this as a delay and consult a speech therapist. Early symptoms can be confusion with first and second person, for example instead of saying, "I want to eat", the child says, "Do you want to eat?" There may be challenges in constructing the sentence with the right grammar. One thing that helps here is consistency in the language – use a single language to communicate with the child at home and at school. Language modelling helps – often when the child is struggling to express something or finish a sentence, parents understand what he is attempting to say and proceed with giving an answer anyway. Instead of this approach, help him finish the sentence each time and get your child to repeat after you. Modelling the scenario this way can be a compelling technique.

THE PLAY WAY: Learning through fun is always an effective medium, primarily because there is no pressure to learn. It works well on those who are better experiential learners. Simple games can be very powerful too; you can ask your child to identify a colour in the room, touch it and run back to you. Similarly, to teach shapes, getting the child to identify the shape in the regular things of the house will make an impression on his mind and also get him to appreciate why it's important to learn them. Ask questions like whether a triangle can fit into a square or a circle, to make him wonder about the size of the objects too. Memory games can be fun; matching similar cards placed upside

down is a simple memory game to try. Keep the number of cards low, based on what you think your child can handle. Show him a picture with three things and ask him to draw it or call out its name after a minute. As he gets better at it, you can increase the number of items on the picture. Finding differences between two pictures can also be a useful game to develop math skills and to improve concentration.

STEP-UP SCENARIOS: Look out for moments to use as platforms to discuss something else... like when you are drawing out a picture of an evening, you can talk about the various shades of the sky, how it can be reddish orange or purplish blue and you can add your twist to it by choosing to discuss colours and then have some fun by mixing paint colours and observing the resultant shades. Else, you can also use the clouds to give a nudge to imagination by identifying shapes hidden in the clouds. Another option is to discuss sunrise and sunset and that can lead you to discuss the directions.

SOCIAL INTERACTION: A child with a learning disability does not necessarily have to be limited with his social interactions. Some kids are extremely good at making friends, but their low confidence on mastering a skill can be a key inhibitor to bond easily with other children. As a parent, gauge where your child is at, and if he is not comfortable in a big group, organise a play date with one other child at your home which may be a safer, conducive environment. Role plays are a good starting point for getting children to play together. If your child is not very verbal, give him lots of paints to mess with... there is no child who will hate that! The development of fine and gross motors skills can happen at a rapid pace when interacting with a sibling or with other children. Climbing





ladders together, throwing and catching a ball are elementary ways for children to socialise and also enhance their motor skills.

TEMPER AGGRESSION: Learning disabilities are often discussed in

conjunction with spurts of aggressive behaviour. Physical activity is the best saviour here and an hour of play time every day in the park can produce the most calming effect. It eases out the restlessness and ensures a smoother

settling into bed every night. Provide your child with the opportunity to explore different textures – give him toys that have contrasting surfaces. Involve your child while you're cooking since it can provide various

opportunities for him to feel many textures like the grains, vegetables and dough. Plugging soothing music on the headphones, preferably at a low volume, results in calm sleep and helps to improve the concentration span.

SPONTANEITY: Although thinking through strategic moves and planning ahead smartly do help, spontaneous interactions between the parent and the child cannot be discounted since they bring out the best in a child. Spontaneous moments usually occur at relaxed times, and these moments come by when you are not hurrying into something. So, buffering time when you are heading out somewhere or just building that extra bit of time into regular routines can get your child to surprise you with a treasured moment.

CUSTOMISE FOR YOUR CHILD: Understanding the problem your child is facing and developing awareness about it can help a long way. Some children are better auditory learners than visual, so art may not help them as much. However, audio CDs narrating stories can be powerful. Music and rhymes can be effective methods to get them to remember something. Some children have a restless energy that can be channelised better through dance forms.

As a parent, putting some thought into the approach and acknowledging that one is not necessarily better than the other can be a good starting point. Consult educators and specialists on the field and importantly, be transparent with the teachers and get them actively involved by keeping the discussions frequent and relevant. With some conscious, careful thinking from the parent and the school, the child can make leaps of progress and the disability does not have to be a hindrance. **P&C**