



# Nebraska Newsbriefs

Learning Disabilities Association of Nebraska

Fall 2007

## ATTENTION PARENTS: A STRUCTURE FOR UNDERSTANDING LEARNING DISABILITIES

Dr. Larry Silver, Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Georgetown University Medical Center, in his book *"The Misunderstood Child: Understanding and Coping with Your Child's Learning Disabilities,"* gives this basic information about learning/learning disabilities and what is required of the brain:

"All of us have areas in which we readily learn. A few of us even seem to excel in limited areas with very little apparent learning—thus, the "natural" athlete, the musical "genius," the "gifted" artist. All of us also have areas in which our abilities will never be more than average and a few areas in which we cannot seem to learn anything. Children, adolescents, and adults with learning disabilities have areas of strengths and average ability, too. These individuals, however, have larger areas, or different areas, of learning weaknesses than most people. Each person with a learning disability displays a different pattern of

strengths and weaknesses. You must learn as much as you can about the whole pattern that your child displays—the disabilities, of course, but also the abilities. What your child can do, and may indeed do well, is just as important as what she or he cannot do, because it is these strengths upon which you must build.

"You may have suspected a learning disability before your daughter, say, entered school. This concern became real when she failed to learn the basic skills taught in first or second grade. Depending on the types of learning disabilities, some students will struggle in the first grade. Others will do well until third or fifth grade, then struggle. Still others may not have problems until middle school or even high school. The areas of disability will become apparent only when they interfere with the demands of the curriculum.

"Your daughter may have read letters backward or confused certain letters or numbers. Or she may have misunderstood

what you said or have been slow in developing speech or muscle coordination.

"In order to help you understand learning disabilities, let me outline a simple scheme describing what the brain must do in order for learning to take place. The first step is input—getting information into the brain from the eyes and ears primarily but,....from other senses as well. Once this information arrives, the brain needs to make sense out of it—a process called integration. Next, the information is stored and later retrieved—the memory process. Finally, the brain reacts through talking or using our muscles—output. The brain does a great deal more than this, of course. Any learning task involves more than one of these processes. However, this simplified scheme will do for our purpose. It will give you a structure for understanding learning disabilities. Once again, then, the learning processes are: Input, Integration, Memory & Output."

### Learning Disability Specialist Offers Study Tips

Now that more students with learning differences attend college - up 20 percent from 1987\* - universities such as Southern Methodist University provide special coaching to help students with ADHD and learning disabilities like dyslexia prepare for finals.

Alexa Taylor, learning disabilities specialist for SMU, found that strategies that help such students could benefit anyone who hasn't yet "mastered the art of finals."

Help yourself or your child master finals season with Ms. Taylor's tips: • Map out a written schedule. Fill in test times, scheduling small blocks of time for a variety of subjects.

- Rein in unstructured time. Set a study time for each day and stick with it. Use meals as natural breaks between subjects.
- Duplicate normal study places. If studying in the library is a habit when class is in session, don't switch to studying in the dorm, where roommates and television can be distractions.
- Use different study styles throughout the day to avoid burnout. Don't plan to read all day. Instead, alternate working problems, making note cards or working with a study group.
- Keep up with workouts.
- Don't neglect basic care. Have regular meals, schedule some down time and don't forget to take any necessary medications.

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\* The National Center for Learning Disabilities

# Learning Disabilities Association of Nebraska

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## *From the President...*

Greetings from LDA of Nebraska!

Our annual conference this year was held on October 27 at ESU #3 and was again a total success. Our keynote speaker, Dr. Ed O'Leary presented valuable information on transition issues. All of our presenters were well received and offered a wealth of information in the breakout sessions. I was able to purchase several books from the LDA bookstore and have found all of them well worth the purchase price. I would like to use this time and space to review a couple of them for you as I believe they offer great information that many will find helpful.

Anne Ford has written a book called On Their Own, Creating an Independent Future for Your Adult Child with Learning Disabilities and ADHD. This is a great book. Ms. Ford discusses the issues that are common to all parents of children with learning disabilities. Ford again states what we parents know--learning disabilities are lifelong. By relating many personal experiences gained in raising her daughter, Allegra, Ford is able to make this book very personal. Ford understands the heartache, confusion, and total frustration parents feel. This book is simply written and down to earth. The topics are so timely: social skills, job hunting, friendships, dating, college, work interactions, and more. Ms. Ford has felt the fear of letting her daughter be her own person; something we all struggle with at one time or another. She offers some very good advice. I thoroughly enjoyed reading this and thinking, "We really are all in this together." I highly recommend this book to everyone.

Some other titles that are going to be very helpful are: Guiding Teens with Learning Disabilities by Arlyn Roffman. This is a good book to read for advice on teen issues when moving from high school to adulthood. There is a great outline for planning through grades 9-12. Roffman has suggestions on getting accommodations and services for job and school. Good book! It is very well written and very helpful.

The Survival Guide for College Students with ADHD or LD by Kathleen Nadeau presents suggestions in finding the right college, talking to professors, choosing a career and courses, learning time management, and more. This would be a great gift for the graduating LD person in your life.

IDEA 2004: Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, A Parent Handbook for School Age Children with Learning Disabilities by Shelley Smith. Ms. Smith is from Nebraska and has written a book that is easily read and helps one understand special education law.

Read, read, read! Isn't that what we encourage our children to do? Check these books out of our library at LDA Nebraska, free if you are a paid member!! You may also purchase these books from the LDA office. Whatever your choice, just grab a hold and forge ahead they are well worth the read. Happy Reading!

Stephanie Cain; President, LDA of Nebraska

## Meet A Board Member

The Learning Disabilities Association of Nebraska board includes parents, educators and other professionals. They all have one thing in common: they volunteer their time to inform other parents, educators, professionals and the general public about the hidden handicap of learning disabilities.

### *Meet Vicki Olson, Secretary of LDA Nebraska*

*Tell us a little bit about yourself.*

My name is Vicki Olson. My family consists of William (husband), DeAnna (senior daughter), and Broderick (sophomore Son). We have lived in the Elkhorn/Omaha area for 8 years. I previously lived in Grand Island, Lincoln, and Gibbon/Kearney areas. I am a RN and work for an insurance company and volunteer as a faith community nurse at our church. I enjoy reading, walking our lab dog (Buddy), and attending activities our kids are involved in. I am a past president of LDA of Nebraska and am currently serving as secretary for this volunteer organization.

*How did you get involved in LDA?*

I got involved with LDA when my husband & I discovered that our daughter had difficulty with reading, writing, and spelling. I somehow got hold of phone numbers for Mary Dell Christensen (PTI-NE) and Sharon Bloechle (LDA of NE). We were living in Grand Island at that time and our daughter was in second grade. Those two ladies helped me obtain resources I desperately needed to learn more about dyslexia (written language disorders) and how to advocate for our daughter. I also attended our first LDA State Conference at this time and discovered what an awesome support system is available to help educate both parents and teachers. I was able to utilize the library resources from LDA of NE and had the opportunity to network with other individuals in this arena. LDA members have definitely given us confidence to have our daughter independently tested, to be prepared to attend IEP meetings with knowledge necessary to make it effective, understanding of test scores to qualify her for an IEP, names of professionals that could assist us in this journey, and transition information as we prepare for her graduation.

*What changes have you seen in special education since your daughter*

*first started receiving services?*

Our daughter was initially identified in third grade as having a SLI (Speech Language Impairment). She only received 15 minutes 2-3x/wk of any "instruction" to assist her. We had her independently tested and she was identified with a SLD (specific learning disability) prior to fourth grade. We provided her with daily instruction daily for one year after we moved to the Elkhorn/Omaha area. To be honest, our daughter has received very minimal assistance over the years from the school systems. She has received extended time, written notes, and had tests read to her. As far as receiving any form of remedial assistance, that has been up to us and our pocket book. I have discovered that you need to be a very knowledgeable, concerned, active & cooperative parent willing to work with your child's situation and teachers.

*What concerns you most about the current trends in special education?*

I am disappointed that children are not identified earlier and given the one on one help that is really needed at that time. I also sense that many kids are "missed" or fall through the "cracks" and continue to struggle then throughout their lifetime. It seems that special education teachers are bogged down with so much paperwork and so little time. Since so many of our kids have "invisible" disabilities, they are commonly overlooked so more time and monies can be spent with those with more physically apparent needs. Many times, techniques and teaching styles that would work well with our kids also work well with the "regular" classroom. From a parent's standpoint, it seems that kids are involved in so many activities that it is hard for the parent to get involved in parent groups that would be beneficial to them. Finally, it is vital that the parent, the teacher, the child, and the school all work together to achieve what will work best for the student's ability to learn. I believe there is a time & place for all kids to be together in the classroom, but there is also a time for one on one instruction. It breaks my heart when I meet a young adult and realize the potential that was never tapped into because there was a misunderstanding of how they learned.

# Finding the “Best Fit” for Young People with LD in the Workplace

Many famous people in history are thought to have been learning disabled. Such names as Albert Einstein, Leonardo da Vinci, Winston Churchill, and John D. Rockefeller are examples. Today there are living examples of successful people with learning disabilities (LD), such as Charles Schwab (Founder and Chairman of The Charles Schwab Corporation), John Chambers (President and CEO of Cisco Systems), and Gaston Caperton (President of the College Board). Their perseverance, intellect, and leadership provide motivation to all those who have LD and who aspire to success despite the odds.” Without question, these famous people became successful through their own trials and tribulations. Yet their success offers an example for anyone with LD. These individuals with LD found the “best fit” between their particular strengths, skills, and interests, and the goals they pursued in their adult life.

It is important to understand that the journeys of tens of thousands of “ordinary” people with LD are just as challenging as the paths taken by individuals with LD who have become household names. In a practical sense, however, anyone with LD can succeed by sticking to some basic guidelines that facilitate a smooth job entry and foster opportunities for job advancement.

## “Best Fit” in the Work Environment

Research on success in the workplace makes it apparent that finding the “best fit” is key to a good start toward a satisfying employment experience. That is one of the perks of life beyond school: One can carve out a “niche of competence,” rather than be confronted by daily academic tasks that are too challenging because of a learning disability.

“Best fit” goes beyond knowing the strengths and weaknesses of the person with learning disabilities, however. It also means seeking out employers in the private or public sector who are “disability friendly.” Many businesses in communities all around the United States believe in a diverse workforce that includes all people with disabilities — and those with learning disabilities specifically. These employers believe they have a responsibility to be good corporate citizens. They have human resource departments and supervisors who are trained to work with the issues of disabilities, and they believe that people with LD can contribute to the mission of their business enterprises. Examples nationally of such businesses are the Marriott Corporation, IBM, Southland Corporation (7-11), and McDonald’s. To identify local examples of disability-friendly workplaces, contact disability advocacy groups and selected state, county, and city governmental agencies.

“Best fit” also involves making sure one fits within a work group. While a disability-friendly business organization is important, ones co-workers and colleagues are also important contributors to job satisfaction, to support, and ultimately to productivity. Contrary to popular belief, the research indicates that persons with LD who go straight from school to work most often find a job through “word of mouth.” It is very common for them to hear of job openings from friends, family, or neighbors, as well as from employees within the business.

This informal job search process provides the opportunity for a person with LD to ask about the spirit of the company, the disposition of the boss, possible job supports, and the climate of the work group where there is a job opening. That is valuable information about what really is happening in a job environment. This knowledge allows a person with LD to envision her fit, beyond just the specific skills needed to do the job adequately.

It is important to find the best fit possible between the young person with LD and a job. However, work environments can change from one year to the next. In fact, a young adult should anticipate a changing work environment. For example, a new supervisor can be assigned to a work unit, or job roles can be restructured, according to the changing

needs of the business. These are just two of the many realities of competitive employment. So, people with LD must be vigilant about their job situation and monitor it very carefully. Attending work unit meetings and seeking out the opinions of co-workers on work-related issues are examples of monitoring one’s work situation. To respond effectively to workplace change, flexibility is very important, as is the ability to be an effective self-advocate.

## Self-Disclosure and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

Within the framework of a changing workplace are further options for employees with learning disabilities. Those are self-disclosure and the use of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The decision to disclose one’s disability to an employer or to invoke one’s rights under ADA brings a new set of dynamics to the employment experience. They place learning disabilities “front and center” in a very important life activity. Research shows that most individuals with learning disabilities do not disclose that they have a learning disability at the point of job entry, or even during the first few years of employment. There are a number of reasons for this, including fear of being stigmatized, lack of knowledge in society about learning disabilities, and feeling that



there is more risk than benefit associated with self-disclosure, even when accommodations guaranteed under the ADA can aid in employment adjustment and success. If a young person with LD can successfully advocate for herself, by articulating how the demands of her work are affected by the manifestations of her learning disability, then she can deal with change effectively and efficiently.

With the choice of self-disclosure and the ongoing process of self-advocacy, the ADA becomes a very important “tool” for the young person with LD, not only for equity, but for support for workplace efficiency and productivity. It’s important to remember, however, that the employee with LD must disclose her disability and thereby invoke her rights under the ADA, in order for reasonable accommodations to be mandatory.

ADA is an equal employment opportunity law, and LD is one of many disabilities the law covers. ADA is not, however, an affirmative action program. Therefore, a person with LD cannot be discriminated against in employment because of a disability issue, but she must compete for the job on an equal footing with other candidates. So, in order for her to be protected by the ADA, it is imperative that she be “qualified.” That means she must have the “essential functions” (knowledge and skills) to do the job. “Essential functions” is a key aspect of the concept of “best fit” mentioned above.

## “Reasonable Accommodations”

After a young person has established her qualifications for the job and competed successfully to get the job, then she can request “reasonable accommodations,” which help provide an even better fit for the job. Reasonable accommodations means that the environment, the employment process, and the job tasks, either individually or in combination, are modified in order to minimize the effects of a learning disability.

Once on the job, it is important for employees with LD to be resourceful in countering any effects of LD that interfere with satisfactory job performance. Therefore, the mantra of adults with LD comes into play: Always be looking for resources for workplace support because the workplace is an ongoing journey of adjusting to a multiplicity of ever-changing demands. An invaluable and free-of-charge support is the Job Accommodation Network (JAN), which has a website (<http://www.jan.wvu.edu/>) and a toll-free phone number (1-800-526-7234). Their services are intended for adults with learning disabilities and/or their work supervisors. Most important, the

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# Learners and Apple Pie

By: Priscilla L. Vail

Most students enter school eager to learn and to succeed. Unfortunately, some intelligent students have difficulties in reading, writing, spelling, and pencil-and-paper arithmetic. Students who struggle in school often experience self esteem and motivation problems.

How can we help kids who struggle in school? Students need to have their thoughts and feelings in apple pie order, and they need a complete pie in order to do their work. Every time a kid takes a slice out of the pie, that much less remains.

What are the main ingredients of the apple pie that students must possess to be successful?

**Attention:** In order to absorb new information or concepts, kids need to channel and focus their attention. Many kids who try hard are distractible. Noises, other people's conversation, or even a stimulating bulletin board can jiggle or break concentration. Distractions from inside, such as worry or sadness, are even more troublesome. Each time attention wanders, a slice come out of the pie.

**Organization:** Everyone knows that organization is a vital part of written work, but many don't realize that it is equally important for reading, listening, and thinking. Students who build a mental framework have hooks on which to hang incoming information and ideas. Students who store concepts by category can retrieve them later and use them handily for further thought. Without organization, this wedge of the pie is liquid instead of solid.

**Language:** People use language to understand what they hear and read and to express themselves. When language functions well, human beings can receive and give out ideas, information, and emotions. In reading, they join single words together in phrases, sentences, paragraphs, chapters, and books.

Without such knowledge, they can't absorb and digest concepts delivered in words. Nor can they share their thoughts, inspirations, and discoveries. Strong language skills form a big section of the pie.

**General Information** In learning, people attach what is new to that which is already familiar. Thus, a major part of catching on to a new idea is to connect it to something already established in the learner's mind. For this reason, the larger the learner's supply of general information, the more new information they will be able to take in, sort, file, and use. Without general information, the pie is incomplete.

**Time:** Students need enough time to read and study and to demonstrate mastery through writing an exam, a paper, a book report, or by creating a project. In addition, they need to understand the concept of time, knowing what the passage of time feels like, such as to write for ten minutes or hand in a paper due in three days. They need to understand the linear nature of time which is the basis for planning their work or charting history. Without a strongly developed sense of time, their pie lacks definition and thus is hard to slice.

**Basic Skills:** Students need automatic basic skills. Each time a student stops to wonder how to form a letter, how to spell a word, or what  $7 \times 6$  equals, a slice comes out of the pie.

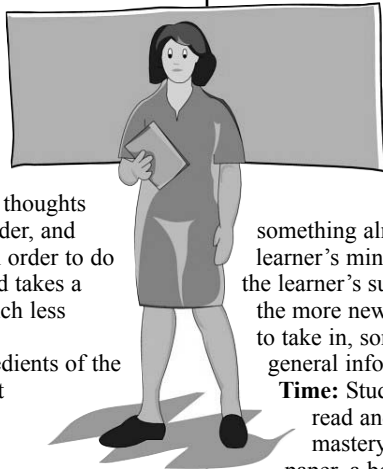
**Emotion:** Some people may ask why we need to think about emotion when we're talking about thinking and learning. Yet we know from our own experiences, as well as from medical research and common sense, that emotion has the power to open or to close pathways, windows, and doorways to learning. The experience of humiliation, frustration, or frequent failure builds negative emotional habits. Fear can make kids show off or play the class clown. Fear can shut down minds, so they aren't able to learn. Fear of embarrassment in front of other kids is a

powerful enough force to turn kids away from taking a chance on trying to learn something new. Memories of shame or humiliation are strong enough to keep kids from taking a chance on a new idea. Many kids are scared of certain subjects, such as math, science, reading, or creative writing. Such negative emotions cut off access to reason, certain kinds of memory, and original thinking. Such negative feelings may grow out of bad experiences with teachers, parents, or classmates or be a reaction to academic expectations and requirements. Every time a kid turns away from learning, an opportunity is lost. When the emotional piece of a learner's pie is crumbled, smashed, or missing, the student loses a vital segment.

What can parents and teachers do to ensure that kids have a complete apple pie? First and foremost, the adults in the student's life need to provide a positive, safe, and supportive environment. They need to understand the nature of the student's learning difficulties and which pieces of the pie are missing or fragmented in order to provide appropriate instruction and classroom accommodations. The goal is to have students' learning, our teaching, and parents' contributions in apple pie order. It is the responsibility of the adults in their world to ensure that students have the necessary ingredients and then are shown how to put them together to produce a complete pie to guarantee student success. Success enhances motivation to continue to learn and leads to increased competency and self-esteem.

*Reprinted from schwablearning.org  
About the Contributor*

Priscilla L. Vail's work centers on the identification of different learning styles and their accommodation in the regular classroom, small groups and individual work. She gives teacher-training and parenting workshops in this country and abroad and was a full-time teacher for twenty-five years. The author of fourteen books and many articles, she is a wife, mother, mother-in-law, and proud granny.



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*LDA of Nebraska is a non-profit nationally affiliated volunteer organization of parents and professionals dedicated to helping children and adults with learning disabilities. LDA does not endorse or recommend any institution, school, treatment or person. We provide support, information and advocacy for our members.*

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# Brain Matures a Few Years Late in ADHD, But Follows Normal Pattern

In youth with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) the brain matures in a normal pattern but is delayed three years in some regions, on average, compared to youth without the disorder, an imaging study by researchers at the National Institutes of Health's (NIH) National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) has revealed. The delay in ADHD was most prominent in regions at the front of the brain's outer mantle (cortex), important for the ability to control thinking, attention and planning. Otherwise, both groups showed a similar back-to-front wave of brain maturation with different areas peaking in thickness at different times

"Finding a normal pattern of cortex maturation, albeit delayed, in children with ADHD should be reassuring to families and could help to explain why many youth eventually seem to grow out of the disorder," explained Philip Shaw, M.D., NIMH Child Psychiatry Branch, who led research team.

Previous brain imaging studies failed to detect the developmental lag because they focused on the size of the relatively large lobes of the brain. The sharp differences emerged only after a new image analysis technique allowed the researchers to pinpoint the thickening and thinning of thousands of cortex sites in hundreds of children and teens, with and without the disorder.

"If you're just looking at the lobes, you have only four measures instead of 40,000," explained Shaw. "You don't pick up the focal, regional changes where this delay is most marked."



Among 223 youth with ADHD, half of 40,000 cortex sites attained peak thickness at an average age of 10.5, compared to age 7.5 in a matched group of youth without the disorder.

Shaw, Judith Rapoport, M.D., of the NIMH Child Psychiatry Branch, Alan Evans, M.D., of McGill University, and colleagues report on their magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) study during the week of November 12, 2007, in the online edition of the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

The researchers scanned most of the 446 participants — ranging from preschoolers to young adults — at least twice at about three-year intervals. They focused on the age when cortex thickening during childhood gives way to thinning following puberty, as unused neural connections are pruned for optimal efficiency (<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/science-news/2004/imaging-study-shows-brain-maturing.shtml>) during the teen years.

In both ADHD and control groups, sensory processing and motor control areas at the back and top of the brain peaked in thickness earlier in childhood, while the frontal cortex areas responsible for higher-order executive control functions peaked later, during the teen years. These frontal areas support the ability to suppress inappropriate actions and thoughts, focus attention, remember things from moment to moment, work for reward, and control movement — functions often disturbed in people with ADHD.

Circuitry in the frontal and temporal (at the side of the brain) areas that integrate

information from the sensory areas with the higher-order functions showed the greatest maturational delay in youth with ADHD. For example, one of the last areas to mature, the middle of the prefrontal cortex, lagged five years in those with the disorder.

The motor cortex emerged as the only area that matured faster than normal in the youth with ADHD, in contrast to the late-maturing frontal cortex areas that direct it. This mismatch might account for the restlessness and fidgety symptoms common among those with the disorder, the researchers suggested.

They also noted that the delayed pattern of maturation observed in ADHD is the opposite of that seen in other developmental brain disorders like autism, in which the volume of brain structures peak at a much earlier-than-normal age.

The findings support the theory that ADHD results from a delay in cortex maturation. In future studies, the researchers hope to find genetic underpinnings of the delay and ways of boosting processes of recovery from the disorder.

"Brain imaging is still not ready for use as a diagnostic tool in ADHD," noted Shaw. "Although the delay in cortex development was marked, it could only be detected when a very large number of children with the disorder were included. It is not yet possible to detect such delay from the brain scans of just one individual. The diagnosis of ADHD remains clinical, based on taking a history from the child, the family and teachers."

Also participating in the research were: Kristen Eskstrand, Wendy Sharp, Jonathan Blumenthal, Dede Greenstein, Liv Clasen, and Jay Giedd, M.D., NIMH.

## A note from Judy Kudym:

The 2007 Joel Kudym scholarship was awarded to an LDA member, Richard Schweitzer from Arnold, Nebraska. He fit our criteria perfectly. We even got to meet Richard and his mother. They were in Omaha for a family reunion and contacted us. It was a wonderful experience. If you go to our Web site, you can see Richard's picture. We will probably do it again for the 2007-2008 senior class.

Thank you for your help. The newsletter article about our scholarship turned out very nice.

Judy Kudym

### Joel Kudym Memorial Scholarship

The 2008 Scholarship applications are due April 1, 2008. Download the 2008 Joel Kudym Memorial Scholarship Application from the website: <http://kudym.com/joel>

Each spring scholarships will be awarded to deserving students. The number and amount of scholarships may vary each year depending on the amount raised during the previous year. Not all funds will be used immediately for scholarships, some funds will be invested for long term growth that will eventually go to scholarships and, potentially, other charitable contributions.

The Joel Kudym Memorial Scholarship is unique. The purpose of the scholarship is to recognize students with financial need who, through effort and perseverance, are seeking to pursue their potential to its maximum. To achieve our fund raising goal, we had many great donations for auction and raffle items such as tools, trips, dinners for two, gift certificates, fishing equipment, camping or sport equipment, holiday items, food baskets, appliances, household items, nursery plants, art work, business services, etc. If you would like to make a donation or help solicit donations from friends, businesses, or other family members, please contact us via e-mail at [memorial.scholarship@kudym.com](mailto:memorial.scholarship@kudym.com).

# Building the Bond between Fathers and Kids with Learning Difficulties

By: Melinda Sacks.

Ever since our son, Alex, was little and I was taking him from tutoring to speech therapy to therapeutic swimming, the overwhelming prevalence of women in those settings was impossible to ignore. In waiting rooms, on the sidelines of swim and horseback riding lessons, and in parent support groups, moms were everywhere. Articles, brochures, and even books offered advice on everything from potty training to classroom accommodations. But, always, the target audience was the mother.

It is no wonder, then, that fathers often feel excluded. And in families where kids have learning disabilities (LD) or Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD), the related emotional and academic problems can leave fathers feeling even more excluded from the family dynamics.

"All the literature is very mother-focused. There is a real shortage of information and support for fathers," observes James May, program director for the Washington State Fathers Network. "I'm amazed at the number of calls I get from men saying, 'I can't find any resources designed for me.' So often there is a feeling of, 'I guess I'm not important.' It doesn't help that you walk into agencies and there are no pictures of men and their kids on the walls. It's easy to see why fathers feel isolated."

Traditionally, it has been the mother who has carted children from school to lessons to play dates. And while more dads are involved in their children's lives today than ever before, the gap is still great, particularly for those fathers whose children struggle in school.

## Why Dads Aren't More Involved

"I tried early on to be really involved in my son's life at school and at home," says one San Francisco Bay Area father of a 12-year-old son who has attention and motor problems. "It just seemed to backfire. Every time I made a suggestion or tried to get involved, my wife would give me 'the look.' It was like I couldn't do anything right, and since she was home with our son the most, I finally just backed off."

This is a common scenario, say family therapists. And the longer it goes on, the harder it is to change the way fathers interact with their children with learning difficulties.

One factor that complicates the picture, says Stanford Children's Health Council Executive Director, Christopher Harris, is the fact that the father is often the parent whose genetic history causes dyslexia (one type of learning disability), which may be passed on

to his child. "From the dad's perspective," Harris explains, "if he had a miserable time in school, living through it again through his child is a painful déjà vu."

What often happens, Harris says, is that the father withdraws from the pain of looking back, or feels unsure how to intercede, because in many cases, the mom has already taken charge.

Add to that the historic stereotype of the strong, invulnerable man, and things only become more difficult.

In the case of the stay-at-home mother and the father who works outside the home, it is even easier for the mother to become the "do-er," and the parent who is most knowledgeable about the child's struggles.

"My wife was the expert," says Robert, who has three children, one of them severely dyslexic. "Whenever there was a school problem, or a problem with making friends, she would have read the latest articles or talked with our counselor, so she would just handle it. The more she did it, the less I was involved." Another complicating factor can be when men try to suppress or deny their feelings about their child's struggles, Harris says. "They'll say to their child with learning difficulties, 'I overcame this thing, why can't you?' and that can put even more distance between them."

## Why Kids Need Their Dads

The U.S. Department of Education is working to get fathers more involved because it is known that children enjoy school more, and do better, when their fathers participate. Research also shows that children whose fathers are not very involved in their daily lives are more likely to drop out of school and to have problems developing relationships of their own. Especially in the life of a child who has learning and emotional issues, the alliance with dad is crucial, say child development experts.

## Bringing Dad into the Picture

- If your family is one in which mom is still the authority and the main participant when it comes to your child with learning difficulties, there are steps both parents can take to change that, say experts. Here are some suggestions:
- First and foremost, dads need to start speaking up. If either parent sees a website on issues impacting children and it speaks only to mothers, it is an opportunity to write to the host and suggest a change in approach to include fathers. If mom or dad visits an agency or school office where the

presence of fathers is either unrepresented or not welcome, fathers can let the administrators know. Don't be afraid to make suggestions.

- Be sure dad has the same information about the child's LD or AD/HD that mom has. If mom is the one who surfs the Web for news and support, share print-outs and take time to discuss them.
- When mothers and fathers can share how they felt about school when they were growing up, it can clear the air if either parent is having trouble reliving his or her own academic or social struggles. Consider seeing a family therapist if this area is too hard to discuss without a facilitator.
- Set aside father-kid time that doesn't involve the usual stressors of competition or homework. Find something you both enjoy and do it purely for fun.
- Don't compete for who's right. Remember that fathers and mothers can each have their own approach to problem solving and neither one has to be "right" or "better." Often mothers discourage fathers from handling an issue because they know men won't do it the way they would. But therapists say it's actually good for kids to learn different approaches from mothers and fathers, since it reflects the fact that there is more than one way to approach life.
- Look into ways to get support for both parents. There is no need for moms or dads to go it alone. Whether it's through a fathers group dad starts himself, or books and videos geared toward the father's perspective, there is support out there for fathers, too. (See the attached list of websites for some of these resources.)

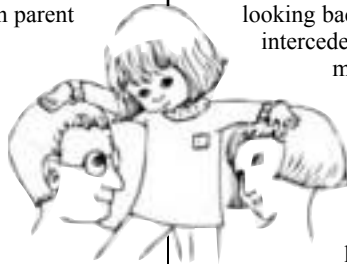
## Be the Dad Who Shows Up

In the end, whether you are the best-read expert on your child's problems is much less important than that you are consistently present and involved with him, experts have found.

At my house, we have, over time, found ways to divide the tasks and activities related to our son. My husband is the golfer and the basketball player, so he shares those activities with Alex by coaching or just going out to play. I'm usually the one who reads aloud and helps with book reports. But when it comes to meeting with teachers or counselors, we both make time.

Eric Speitzel, whose two grown sons both have dyslexia, says he has always made time

(Continued on Page 7)



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*It is still under  
construction . . . .  
but you can check for  
Events, Library List, etc.*

## Finding "Best Fit"

(Continued from Page 3)

consultants at JAN are particularly skilled at solving LD-related job problems, in order to facilitate job success.

Literacy centers are another support that can promote the development of skills to improve job performance, such as reading, writing, and computing. Research shows that the great majority of adults with learning disabilities do not go on to post-secondary education. Literacy centers can provide skill acquisition on a short-term basis and with one-on-one instruction. Their services provide the employee with LD an opportunity to

upgrade her skills without placing too many demands on her employer.

The destiny of persons with LD is competitive employment. Recent employment reports describe an ever-changing job market. It is not uncommon for an employee in the U.S. to have as many as eight jobs in the first ten years of employment. The young person with LD needs to look beyond the point of job entry and take a long-term view of transition to a workplace where change can be constant. Under current labor market conditions, finding the best fit at job entry is an important ingredient of success. The other key ingredient is constantly being adaptive to the changing demands of the workplace.

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### About the Contributor



**Paul J. Gerber, Ph.D.**, is a Professor in the Department of Special Education and Disability Policy and the Department of Foundations of Education at Virginia Commonwealth University. For the

past twenty years he has researched, written, and presented extensively about post-school issues for adults with learning disabilities, particularly in the area of employment.

## Building the Bond (Continued from Page 6)

to be around. What has bothered him is the continuous lack of understanding of other people about what it is like to be a father of children with LD. "Over and over I'd hear, 'Your kids are lazy,' or, 'They could do that if they just tried.'" He says "I'm not dyslexic, but I did everything with my sons. **You have to find ways to get involved and be a part of what's going on. You have to try to find out what it's like.** Everybody should do a simulation (a program with exercises designed to simulate what it's like to be dyslexic, put on by organizations like Parents Helping Parents). It's about hanging in there with your kids. You just can't give up."

"My 8-year-old daughter and husband have LD. My husband wasn't told when he was younger and he just felt stupid. He has dyslexia. The effects of not feeling like everyone else are still with him. Now my daughter is going through the same thing. He didn't want to help her at first. I explained that although I do my best I can't understand what she is going through. He does. So, he started helping her. She is doing so much better and feels better about herself because her daddy has LD too. He isn't stupid so she knows she isn't either. Since he started helping her, her grades have gone up dramatically. I am so happy that my husband got involved, it really made a difference for our daughter." — Jennaren

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**About the Contributors**

**Melinda Sacks** is a journalist who specializes in writing on children, education, learning disabilities, and family issues. She has written for the San Jose Mercury News, the San Francisco Chronicle, Stanford Magazine, and many other Bay Area publications.

## Tips for Strengthening Communication

- Show your children you love them by hugging them or saying "I love you" often.
- Give your children responsibilities that are appropriate for their age or abilities.
- Help your children set realistic goals. Encourage them to do the best they can.
- Accept your children's feelings.
- Teach your children that anger is a normal and acceptable feeling. Encourage them to express anger using safe, effective and appropriate ways.
- Be an active listener by encouraging your children to express their feelings and thoughts, asking respectful questions to better understand their experience, and offering feedback and guidance rather than advice. Give your children nonverbal support and encouragement such as a hug, a pat on the shoulder, nodding your head, or making eye contact.
- Help your children learn from their mistakes by asking questions such as "What can you learn from that?" or "What can you do differently next time?"



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