

Helping a child classified 'learning disabled'



ALL ABOUT FAMILIES
ALICE MCCARTHY

Alice McCarthy, who prepares this column, has asked Dr. Barry E. McNamara and Francine J. McNamara, MSW, CSW, to answer the following question from a reader.

Q. My child has been classified as "learning disabled." He will be attending a resource room at school to address his educational needs, but what can I do at home? L. N., Madison Heights

A. It is not unusual for a parent of a child with a learning disability to lament, "She's so disorganized," or make other complaints

about behavior at home. Learning disabilities are not restricted to school. Because it is often thought of as a school-based disorder, parents may not recognize the ways a learning disability may show up at home.

Getting Ready for School: In the morning you may be tired, feel rushed and have the events of the day on your mind. Add to this a learning disability, and it's no wonder that many parents find morning a difficult time.

Some children dislike going to school. They have experienced failure so much that they will finally miss their bus or ride to school. Other kids underestimate the amount of time it takes for a specific activity, such as eating, and cause considerable turmoil. Children who have difficulty with fine motor skills may take longer to get dressed and have problems with eating breakfast, not to mention the child with perceptual

problems who frequently knocks over the milk.

At times, it may appear that your child is doing this on purpose. Not true. One way to resolve many morning problems is for the parents to get up earlier to do what must be done before the children get up. Follow the same routine every day.

You may find using a kitchen timer helpful. Many parents set the timer for the amount of minutes children have to get dressed, brush teeth, wash, and so on. Only after these tasks are completed are children rewarded with leisure activities.

Parents who frequently praise their children for appropriate behavior find that is helpful, too. It is crucial that siblings understand their sibling's disability. However, they also must know that parents are fair.

After School: Homework is usually the main issue for parents of children with learning disabilities. Many children forget what they have to do. It's a good idea to get a separate assignment

book just for homework. Also, have an extra set of books at home for children who have a hard time remembering.

Homework time needs to be structured and supervised. Some children with learning disabilities need a great deal of help to organize.

Dinner Time: Today, too many parents say that dinner time is an impossible time of day due to busy schedules and interpersonal family problems. The family simply does not eat together.

It's worth the effort to have a meal together. Ask children to pitch in. When we ask everyone to help, camaraderie and family cohesiveness come into practice, along with problem solving and decision making.

However, a child's learning disabilities may show up. For example, if your child is responsible for setting the table and is always short a few utensils, it might be due to his inability to match object to number.

Children who always seem to knock over things may have an at-

tentive or perceptual deficit. Assign tasks for each child and avoid those that cause problems. Encourage everyone to pass items around — not across — the table.

Keeping Calm: Rather than verbally reprimanding or punishing behavior that you may find annoying, try to determine if the behavior comes from a learning disability. A child who has difficulty zipping her jacket because of fine motor problems will never learn how to do these tasks through punishment.

The task needs to be broken down into small steps. The child should be rewarded for completion of each step. You may find that you should avoid zippers. At best, you may recognize not defiance but a learning disability.

Speak to members of your school's multi-disciplinary team. Ask them for examples of how your child's learning disability may show up. Too many parents realize too late that they have punished because of the annoying things their children do because of a learning disability.

You can eliminate this source of guilt by knowing when actions are related to a learning disability. Sometimes the whole family needs professional help.

Barry McNamara is an associate professor of special education at D'Avella College in Oakdale, New York. He is author of "The Resource Room: A Guide for Special Education" and an upcoming book "Learning Disabilities in Urban Settings." **Francine McNamara** is a clinical social worker who maintains a private practice.

In addition to co-authoring "Keys to Parenting a Child with a Learning Disability," the McNamaras are authors of "Keys to Parenting a Child with an Attention Deficit Disorder" (both books are published by Barron's). The couple writes a column, focusing on the needs of children with special educational needs, in Long Island Parenting News (New York). They are educational columnists and contributing editors for Twins Magazine. To reach the McNamaras, call (616) 693-3346.

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