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How Myths About Learning Disabilities Rob Many of Their Potential to Succeed and Contribute in School and in the Workplace

Learning disabilities have a persistent and lifelong impact that can have enormous personal, communal, and economic consequences. But it is not because individuals with learning disabilities lack ability. Rather, it is because pervasive myths and misconceptions interfere with efforts to support and meet the needs of all students and prepare them to become productive members of our workforce.

Given the urgency of this situation, two organizations with the longest histories of serving individuals with learning disabilities, including dyslexia, the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) and the Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDA), partnered in February 2018 to promote a better understanding of, and support for, individuals with learning disabilities. IDA and LDA recognize that in the absence of accurate and early identification and intervention, individuals with learning disabilities are at grave risk of never accessing their full academic, creative, and career potential. The untapped potential of individuals with learning disabilities is not simply a matter of personal tragedy. Under-serving this significant population has negative economic and society implications.

As a first step, IDA and LDA wrote this white paper to address the continuing misunderstandings about the nature of learning disabilities and the life-long benefit of effective educational interventions. With appropriate intervention and support, all children, including those with learning disabilities, can have the tools and resources they need to live their best possible lives. This will result in many more individuals with learning disabilities acquiring the adaptive skills needed to seamlessly integrate their use of assistive technology and other supports into the performance of their jobs.

As family, friends, neighbors, employers and fellow citizens we can help all students, including those with learning disabilities, achieve their potential and lead fulfilling, productive lives. Our mission is to understand the nature of learning disabilities and insist upon access for all to the early identification, appropriate remediation, and life-long support needed to become productive and valuable members of our community.

What is a learning disability?



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Learning disabilities result from neurologically based processing disorders that have an impact on an individual's ability to process, store, or produce information. Learning disabilities can affect one's ability to read, write, speak, spell, compute math, and reason. Individuals with learning disabilities can also have co-occurring challenges with organization, focus, listening comprehension, social skills, motor skills, or a combination of these.

Learning disabilities such as dyscalculia can affect math. Two kinds of learning disabilities that affect reading include dyslexia and specific reading comprehension deficit. Dysgraphia and written expression disorders can affect achievement and performance in writing. Auditory processing, including phonological processing; memory processes, including short-term memory and long-term retrieval skills; and fluid reasoning abilities are among the processing skills that can be affected. Learning disabilities often co-occur with other conditions including attention and executive functioning disorders.

Learning disabilities often run in families. They should not be confused with other disabilities such as intellectual disabilities, autism, deafness, blindness, and behavioral disorders. None of these conditions are learning disabilities. Because learning disabilities cannot be seen, they often go undetected. Recognizing a learning disability is even more difficult because the severity and characteristics vary.

What is dyslexia?

Dyslexia is a specific learning disability. The term *dyslexia* refers to a cluster of symptoms that result in people having difficulties with specific language skills, particularly reading. Students with dyslexia usually experience difficulties with other language skills such as spelling, writing, and pronouncing words. Severe cases of dyslexia affect individuals throughout their lives; however, its impact can change at different stages in a person's life. It is referred to as a learning disability because dyslexia can make it very difficult for a student to succeed academically in the typical instructional environment, and in its more severe forms, will qualify a student for special education, special accommodations, or extra support services.

Children with dyslexia respond slowly to the instruction being provided to their peers but not because of their IQ or lack of effort. They need more intensive direct reading instruction or Structured Literacy Instruction (SLI). All children, including those with dyslexia, respond best to reading instruction that includes the components of SLI:

- explicit, systematic, and sequential teaching of literacy across multiple components (e.g. phonemic awareness, letter-sound relationships, syllable patterns, morphemes, vocabulary, sentence structure, paragraph structure, text structure, comprehension strategy instruction, etc.);



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- cumulative practice and ongoing review of previously introduced/mastered skills;
 - a high level of student-teacher interaction;
 - the use of carefully selected examples and non-examples to teach essential concepts, skills, and strategies;
 - the use of decodable texts in developmental contexts; and,
 - prompt, corrective feedback.

The nature of the instruction or instructional targets do not change for children with dyslexia. What changes is the duration and intensity of the instruction. Without it, children with dyslexia will continue to lag behind their peers. In other words, they do not catch up.

The Urgency of the Problem

Learning disabilities continues to be the largest category of children identified and served in public schools through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The most recent data available indicates that 13 percent of students in K–12 public schools, 6.7 million, are identified as students with disabilities and **34 percent of that population is classified as having a learning disability**. In addition to the 2.27 million children with learning disabilities officially identified and served in public schools, countless other students with learning disabilities do not meet eligibility criteria for services and others are educated outside of the public schoolsⁱ. In other words, far too many children and young adults are afforded inadequate services and supports.

Life-Limiting Myths about Learning Disabilities

IDA and LDA believe that individuals with learning disabilities continue to be underserved because of the myths and misconceptions among parents, educators, and policy makers. In 2010, the Emily Hall Tremain Foundation released a [poll](#) indicating alarming confusion among parents and educators that could have dire consequences for those with learning disabilities. The data showed seventy percent of parents, educators, and school administrators incorrectly linked learning disabilities with mental retardation and the majority of the public believe the home environment and laziness are among the causes of learning disabilities.ⁱⁱ Four years later, data collected by the National Center on Learning Disabilities (NCLD) indicated little had changed. NCLD found the 43 percent of respondents to [their survey](#) believed that learning disabilities are associated with low IQ and more than one third possessed inaccurate understanding of the causes of learning disabilities and the interventions that work for different learning profiles.ⁱⁱⁱ



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IDA and LDA have resolved to work together to combat these misperceptions that lead to stigmatization and unfulfilled potential. A good place to start is with the facts.

The Facts about Learning Disabilities

To help the public understand the true nature of learning disabilities, IDA and LDA have compiled the following facts to counter the many myths:

- Learning disabilities are neurobiological in origin and affect the way a person's brain processes information, resulting in unexpected underachievement in reading, writing, and/or math.
- Individuals at varying levels of intelligence, including those with average or above-average intelligence, can have learning disabilities.
- Learning disabilities are suggested by unexpected academic under-achievement in relation to the ability of the individual.
- The ability of an individual to demonstrate average or better achievement in certain circumstances does not preclude the presence of a learning disability.
- For success, individuals with learning disabilities require early identification and timely specialized assessments and interventions involving home, school, community, and workplace settings.
- Individuals with learning disabilities are capable of average or above average achievement when appropriate educational interventions and other supports are provided.
- Learning disabilities are suggested by unexpected academic under-achievement, or average or better achievement that is maintained only by unusually high levels of effort and support.

Where We Are and Where We Need to Go

IDA and LDA acknowledge that some progress has been made. [NCLD's 2014 data](#) indicated that 91 percent of respondents were familiar with dyslexia.^{iv} Increased awareness of dyslexia and parent advocacy has resulted in dyslexia-related legislation being passed around the country. [As of the spring of 2018, 42 states have passed some sort of legislation or regulation pertaining to the identification and intervention for students with dyslexia.](#)^v Although dyslexia is the most well-researched and best understood of all learning disabilities, it is not the only



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learning disability. Additionally, many individuals with dyslexia have other co-occurring learning disabilities and other disorders, including, but not limited to, attention deficits, social and emotional conditions, and communication disorders.

IDA and LDA believe that all individuals with learning disabilities deserve evidenced-based identification and intervention as early as possible. Data suggests that, despite misperceptions, there is broad support among the public for early identification and intervention. Ninety-five percent of respondents to the 2010 survey by the Tremaine Foundation, agreed with the statement, “Children can, over time, be taught to compensate for learning disabilities with early diagnosis and proper instruction.” Unfortunately, early identification is not the norm for individuals with learning disabilities. Parent misconceptions are partially to blame. The Tremaine Foundation poll found that more than two thirds of parents think specific signs of learning disabilities are something a 2 to 4-year-old will outgrow. Research has consistently shown that earlier appropriate interventions are started, the better the educational outcomes. Despite this evidence, many individuals are identified only after years of failure and accumulation of emotional damage and social stigma.

Once identified, there is scant evidence that students with learning disabilities are provided with the appropriate, evidence-based interventions and supports. The 2017 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data for students with disabilities showed virtually no improvement over the 2015 results. The majority of students with disabilities performed in the “below basic” category in both reading and math. A number of studies have demonstrated that teachers lack knowledge of evidenced-based instructional strategies grounded in the science of learning. Additionally, although many adults with learning disabilities acquire adaptive skills and require few supports to be successful in the workplace, many individuals with learning disabilities will need specialized instruction, accommodations, and compensatory strategies throughout life to access their educational and career potential.

IDA and LDA are resolved to combat misperceptions that lead to stigmatization and unfulfilled potential. We commit to working together to advocate for diagnostic and prescriptive educational strategies and models of support to meet all students with learning disabilities where they are and to assist them in accessing their fullest potential. Our goal is to empower students, teaching professionals, parents, and lawmakers to advance the standing of all who struggle to learn.

The International Dyslexia Association (IDA) provides the opportunity for all people who struggle with dyslexia and other related reading differences to have richer, more robust lives by providing access to the tools and resources they need. IDA’s home office, 42 branches in the United States and Canada, and 31 Global Partners provide educator training, publications,



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information, and support to help struggling readers around the world. IDA is the authoritative voice of current and reliable research and information to educate families and professionals about dyslexia and to inform the practice and policy changes needed to provide effective instruction for all people to learn to read. IDA has been serving individuals with dyslexia, their families, and professionals in the field for more than 65 years. Its membership is composed of a global network of people with dyslexia, their families, educators, diagnosticians, physicians, researchers, and other professionals in the field. IDA provides publications and information and referral services to thousands of people each year, and its annual conference attracts thousands of researchers, clinicians, parents, teachers, psychologists, educational therapists, and people with dyslexia.

Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDA) In 1963, a parent-organized conference and a paper presented by Dr. Samuel Kirk, who coined the term *learning disability*, marked the start of LDA. First incorporated in 1964 under the name Association for Children with Learning Disabilities, LDA eventually changed its name to reflect that learning disabilities are life-long and have an impact on both children and adults. LDA is a grassroots organization with 47 state and local affiliates, and thousands of members across the United States and abroad which is comprised of parents, educators, adults with learning disabilities, and professionals who provide support, information, and advocacy on behalf of individuals with learning disabilities. LDA holds an annual conference each February bringing together educators, para-professionals and other school personnel, researchers, parents and individuals with learning disabilities to learn the latest in best practices and research in the field of learning disabilities.

ⁱ IES, NCES (2018). The Condition of Education, Children and Youth with Disabilities. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgg.asp

ⁱⁱ GfK Roper (2010). *Measuring progress in public & parental understanding of learning disabilities*. Available from <https://dyslexiaida.org/tremaine-foundation-study/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Cortiella, C., & Horowitz, S. (2014). *The State of Learning Disabilities: Facts, Trends and Emerging Issues*. New York: National Center for Learning Disabilities.

^{iv} Cortiella, C., & Horowitz, S. (2014). *The State of Learning Disabilities: Facts, Trends and Emerging Issues*. New York: National Center for Learning Disabilities.

^v Youman, M., & Mather, N. (Spring, 2018). Dyslexia laws in the USA: A 2018 update. *Perspectives on Language and Literacy*, 44(3), 37–41. Available from <https://dyslexiaida.org/dyslexia-laws-in-the-usa-an-update/>