

# LEARNING DISABILITIES OR LEARNING STYLES?

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Do they exist?

Yes, they do, but true learning disabilities are rare. I believe that our educational system is too quick to blame learning disabilities and to label students as dyslexic, MBD, ADD, or any of the other familiar labels, instead of noting differences in learning styles and using some common sense: if the student can't get it this way, try a different way!

Even if the label is appropriate, so what? No label has ever fixed the problem or helped a teacher or parent devise effective teaching methods.

But, a statement such as the student has trouble sequencing two-letter sounds defines a specific problem and allows for developing an appropriate strategy.

In other words, the bottom line is: each student is unique, having different strengths and weaknesses, as well as different learning styles.

All too often kids are labeled because someone is confusing the need for a different teaching method with a learning problem.

Or, as I strongly believe, many learning problems are actually created because we don't take into account an individual child's unique learning timetable: they should all learn the alphabet in preschool, start reading in kindergarten and first grade, do fractions in third, start cursive in second, and so on.

Why? They don't all begin to walk and talk at the same time!

Some students need more time. Some students need a different program.

'In Their Own Way' by Thomas Armstrong discusses this issue: It is time for the schools, and parents as well, to start focusing their attention on the inner capabilities of each and every child . . . the schools persist in labeling hundreds of thousands of children with perfectly normal brains as minimally brain damaged or neurologically handicapped,í when in fact teachers simply have not found a way of teaching them on their own terms, according to their own unique patterns of neurological functioning . . .

"The part of the brain that thrives on worksheets and teacher lectures probably takes up less than one percent of the total available for learning. More likely, these stale methods of learning are actually what educator Leslie Hart refers to as 'brain-antagonistic' - they shut down potentials rather than open them up . . . It will end when parents decide to toss aside all of these labels and begin the task of understanding and nurturing their children's personal learning styles so that they can begin to learn in their own way."

What about when there really is a learning or developmental delay? The concept of different learning style/appropriate teaching method still applies. Obviously, the student needs to be taught a different way if the way that has been presented hasn't worked.

If you feel that you need special help, do contact a professional. Just make sure that the professional will be giving you specific techniques to work on specific learning problems,î and not just a label!

However, most kids who are thought to have a learning disability do not.

Now, a person might be having a 'problem' learning something in particular, but this is not the same as a disability.

For example, a 12-year-old student is very artistic and creative, reads adequately for her grade level, is physically active and is a great swimmer and runner, holds appropriate conversations, loves animals, is alert and friendly and enthusiastic, is at 'grade level' in math, and needs to work on spelling and punctuation which are not her strengths.

Notice I said and, not but! The and gives a very different perspective. The and means that the latter phrase is one more part of the description about what she is like.

If we had said but, that would have basically discounted all the previous statements about her. That is usually what is done: Mary can do this and this and this, BUT - meaning, all of that hardly counts because she has such a deficiency in this or that area, and this deficiency is the only thing we are going to notice about her. And then we label this deficiency a learning disability or learning handicap of some sort.

How dare we think of Mary as disabled! - this charming, bright and intelligent person who has many talents that you and I do not possess. We have done such a good job convincing people of this that those adults who grew up not knowing why they had problems in school are thrilled when they learn that they actually were, and are, 'disabled,' because this gives them a good reason for not having done well, as opposed to thinking that they are merely stupid.

There must be more to good education than this!  
I believe that good education fosters

respect and awe for the uniqueness of each individual . . .  
excitement in discovering learning styles and teaching  
techniques . . .

comfortableness with a different kind of education  
program which  
    frees the spirit,  
    combines fun with learning,  
    views students as capable rather than disabled.

ì . . . You are precious in my eyes . . .  
you are honored and I love you . . . .î  
Isaac 43:4

(adapted from Home Schooling the Child with Learning  
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