

The Invisible Disabilities

Arpita Yadav

Do you remember watching the movie *Taare Zameen Par*? The movie raised awareness among people about learning disabilities and it also inspired me to do something. Having worked as a special educator for several years, I decided to focus on Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD). I have also attempted to bring in my experience of working with children with learning disabilities to make them independent and 'fight their own battles.' Specific Learning disabilities are not emotional disturbances, intellectual disabilities, or sensory impairments. They are not caused by inadequate parenting or lack of educational opportunity.

Let us begin by understanding what SLDs are and some aspects related to them.

- A neurological disorder resulting from a difference in the way a person's brain is 'wired'.
- Children with SLD are smart as or smarter than their peers but have difficulty reading, writing, spelling, and reasoning, recalling and/or organising information, if left to figure things out by themselves or if taught in conventional ways.
- SLDs cannot be cured or fixed. However, with the right support and intervention, children can do well in school and go on to be successful in their careers.

Broadly speaking, these disorders involve one or more basic psychological processes:

1. Auditory and visual perception (input)
2. Sequencing, abstraction, and organisation (integration)
3. Working, short term, and long-term recall (memory)
4. Expressive language (output) and
5. Fine and gross motor skills

Characteristics

- Slow reading rate
- Problems with understanding and remembering

what is read

- Confusion with words similar in appearance/sound
- Difficulty in sentence structure and poor grammar
- Slow writing rate and an overly large handwriting
- Frequent spelling errors
- Problem with reasoning and abstract concepts
- Problem remembering math rules
- Difficulty in recalling arithmetic operations
- Difficulty in finding main ideas and important points in a text
- Reversals of letters and math symbols
- Poor note-taking and outlining
- Difficulty following directions
- Poor organisation and management of time
- Difficulty in beginning and sticking to study
- Inability to complete work or assignments in given time

Types of SLDs

Auditory Processing Disorder

Auditory Processing Disorder (APD) is a condition that adversely affects the way sounds travelling through the ear are processed by the brain. Individuals with APD do not recognise subtle differences between sounds in words, even if they are loud and clear enough to be heard. They can also find it difficult to tell where sounds are coming from, to make sense of the order of sounds, or to block out competing background noises. For instance, a child might study by herself in a silent place but find it difficult to follow a direction or understand a lesson in class.

Types of Auditory Processing Disorder

- *Auditory figure ground* is the inability to pay attention if there is noise in the background. Noisy, loosely structured classrooms could be very frustrating.
- *Auditory memory* is the difficulty in remembering information such as directions, lists, or study materials. It can be immediate (I can't remember

it now) and/or delayed (I can't remember it for later).

- *Auditory discrimination* is the difficulty in hearing the difference between words or sounds that are similar (boat for coat, ch for sh).
- *Auditory attention* is the inability to stay focused or listening long enough in class to complete a task.
- *Auditory cohesion* is the inability to draw inferences from conversations, understand riddles, or comprehend verbal math problems, all of which require heightened auditory processing and language levels.

Helping the child

- Reduce background noise whenever possible and have the child look at you when you are speaking
- Use simple, expressive sentences and speak slightly slower and softer.
- Ask the child to repeat the directions back to you. Keep repeating them aloud (to you or to himself) until the task is completed.
- For directions that are to be completed later, writing notes, wearing a watch, maintaining an organised household routine help.
- Move to quieter places when listening is necessary. Aid him with a quiet place to study at home and changed seating plans at school, such as at the front of the class or with the back to the window
- Study aids, like tape recorders, online notes specially designed for children with APD will support learning.
- Assign regular and realistic chores, including keeping a neat room and desk.

Dyscalculia

Dyscalculia is a specific learning disability that affects a person's ability to understand numbers and learn the rules of maths. Individuals with this type of SLD may also have poor comprehension of symbols; may struggle with memorising and organising numbers; have difficulty telling time, or; have trouble with counting.

Types of dyscalculia

- *Verbal dyscalculia* is a problem in which the child can read or write numbers, but has a hard time recognising them when presented verbally.
- *Practognostic dyscalculia* is when the child

has difficulty in manipulating mathematical concepts, such as comparing objects (bigger, smaller).

- *Lexical dyscalculia* is a problem in which the child faces difficulty in reading numerals and maths symbols (including + and -).
- *Graphical dyscalculia* is when the child has difficulty in reading, writing and using correct symbols, though the concepts are understood.
- *Ideognostical dyscalculia* is when the child has difficulty in connecting mathematical symbols and their relationships.
- *Operational dyscalculia* is a child's difficulty in performing arithmetic operations.

Helping the child

- **Cooking together:** Parent and child can choose a recipe, make a list and let the child be in charge of getting the ingredients needed. For example, 1 kg of cauliflower, 3 carrots, 2 onions, 6 pieces of capsicum or cutting the vegetables into 5 pieces.
- **Playing with the clock:** Tell the child that he is in charge of telling you when it is a certain time, celebrating how well he/she did it and how responsible and grown-up he/she is.
- **Shopping:** Giving a child the responsibility to buy things herself/himself, checking money in the wallet can help a child understand some concepts with numbers.
- **Counting:** Having them count the number of cars they can see, the people on the road, the number of people wearing white shoes, the number of stairs in their climb.
- **Remembering telephone numbers:** The child can recall the first three numerals of grandma's phone number and an adult can punch in the rest. Call together and if he/she did it well, celebrate.
- **Shops:** The child can be the clerk in a store, with things from the home and school that are 'on sale'. Each has a 'price'. Teacher and classmates (at school) and parents and other family members (at home) are customers. This game is good practice for quantity, addition, subtraction and managing money.

Dysgraphia

Dysgraphia is a specific learning disability that affects a person's handwriting ability and fine motor skills. Problems may include illegible handwriting,

inconsistent spacing, poor spatial planning on paper, poor spelling, and difficulty composing writing as well as thinking and writing at the same time.

Characteristics

- A mixture of upper case/lower case letters, irregular size and shapes, incomplete letters, incorrect grip resulting in illegibility.
- Reluctance or refusal to complete writing tasks, crying and stress resulting from frustration at inability or slowness in writing, talking to self while writing.

A student speaks

Writing is definitely the worst task of all. It's just too hard to remember all the things I need to, like full stops and capital letters. Then, it's almost impossible to think about how to spell words when I'm busy trying to think about the story. It's so hard to remember what I'm writing about I decide it's easier to write just a few sentences. That doesn't hurt my hand so much either. My teachers, in my previous school, used to complain, but I just keep writing very short stories. After all, they don't understand what it's like to struggle and struggle to write and still have the paper turn out sloppy and full of mistakes. They always tell me how messy my papers are. They just can't understand how hard I try. No matter how carefully I work, the words don't look the way they look for the other kids. Sometimes I know how I want the words to look, but it just doesn't turn out that way.

This student is otherwise gifted: he has a high IQ and his verbal expression and reading are excellent. He is very good with computers, though he struggles to write.

Types of dysgraphia

- *Dyslexic dysgraphia* because of which spontaneously written work is illegible, copied work is good and spelling is bad.
- *Motor dysgraphia* is due to deficient fine motor skills, poor dexterity, poor muscle tone, and/or unspecified motor clumsiness. Generally, written work is poor to illegible, even if copied by sight from another document and writing of a small paragraph requires extreme effort.
- *Spatial dysgraphia* is the difficulty in the

understanding of space and there is trouble writing on the lines and spaces between words.

- *Phonological dysgraphia* is characterised by writing and spelling disturbances in which the spelling of unfamiliar words, non-words, and phonetically irregular words is impaired.
- *Lexical dysgraphia* is when a child can spell but relies on standard sound-to-letter patterns with misspelling of irregular words. This is more common in non-phonetic languages, such as English and French as against Indian languages, which are phonetic.

Helping the child

- **Feel the letters:** Help the child focus on feeling—not seeing—how a letter is made by tracing a letter on the child's back or on his palm. Then see if he can reproduce that letter on a piece of paper.
- **Writing large:** Dysgraphia results in forgetting how letters are formed. Using multi-sensory materials to form large letters can help.
- **Using clay:** Rolling clay into ropes and making letters builds hand strength and boosts fine motor skills while reinforcing memory of the shapes.
- **Break it up!** The key word is the acronym **POWER**:
 - P – prepare, list all your ideas
 - O – organise and assemble them
 - W – write the draft
 - E – edit, looking for and correcting any errors
 - R – revise, write the final draft

This works very well with older children and they learn it easily. Other students in the class also help the child in executing this strategy.

Dyslexia

A specific learning disability that affects reading and related language-based processing skills. It can affect reading fluency, decoding, reading comprehension, recall, writing, spelling and, sometimes, speech. The severity can differ in each individual and can exist along with other related disorders (co-morbidities).

Characteristics

- Appears bright, highly intelligent, and articulate but unable to read, write, or spell at grade level and is therefore labelled as lazy, careless and not trying hard enough.

- Has a high IQ, but does not like tests and exams. This leads to poor self-esteem, though the child could have diverse talents such as art, drama, sports, designing, business, etc.
- Has difficulty sustaining attention: seems to be hyperactive or a dreamer.
- Learns best through hands-on experience, demonstrations, experimentation, observation, and visual aids.
- Letters similar in shape - *d, p, q, g* - cause confusion. The word *bird* could appear as *drib*.
- Reading aloud creates immense stress as letters and their sounds are not co-related, so that the same line or passage is read over and over again.

Types of dyslexia

- *Phonological*: The child has trouble breaking down the sounds of language and matching those sounds with written symbols. Challenges with phonological processing make it hard to decode words.
- *Surface*: The child can sound out new words, but struggle to recognize common words by sight. Words like weight or debt, that sound different from their spellings, are difficult.
- *Rapid-naming deficit*: Many children with dyslexia have trouble rapidly naming things like letters, numbers and colours when they see them.

Helping the child

- Reading: Read out loud to the child. Allow him or her to read anything and everything. A short passage could be read several times.
- Vocabulary: Ask the child to tell parent/teacher a new word he/she has learned every day. Talk about what it means, look it up in a dictionary, and make up sentences with the word.
- Games: Clap so he/she can hear how many syllables a word contains, break up word sounds and blend them back together, call attention to alliterations in songs, poems, and nursery rhymes. Use computer resources, including apps, digital learning games, and websites with learning games.
- Encourage pre-teaching: Prior to reading a text, relate everything to real experiences. Generalise with visuals, toys, common household items, field trips.

Language Processing Disorder

A specific type of Auditory Processing Disorder

(APD) in which there is difficulty attaching meaning to sound groups that form words, sentences and stories. LPD can affect expressive language and/or receptive language.

Characteristics

- Exhibits poor reading comprehension.
- Shows difficulty expressing thoughts in verbal form.
- Has difficulty labelling objects or recognising labels.
- Is often frustrated by having a lot to say and no way to say it.
- Feels that words are right on the tip of the tongue but is unable to articulate them.
- May be depressed or having feelings of sadness.
- Has difficulty understanding jokes.

Expressive Language Disorder

This is generally characterised by a small vocabulary for the age, so asking for things by the correct name is a struggle. There is also a difficulty following the rules of grammar, resulting in an inability to use complex sentences.

Challenges

- A child may use descriptive words that are associated with the item they are trying to identify, but have difficulty naming it.
- Incorrect use of words with similar meanings: 'I need socks *in* my feet' instead of 'I need socks *on* my feet'.
- Difficulty in using creative or original language: talking around or going on and on about a subject.
- Using fillers: using *um* or *you know* excessively to fill in time while they try and come up with the words they want to say.
- Using verbiage: It takes two to four seconds for a child to answer normal questions. This is called *response latency time*. Using 'I forgot' or 'I don't know' often is buying time to frame the sentence.
- Talking to self, rehearsing: repeating information received over and over, to help compensate for poor short-term memory.
- Inconsistencies in learning: needing several different kinds of input in order to receive information and understand it.
- Can identify errors but is not able to fix them: understanding that an error has been made, but

not knowing how to correct it.

- Does not finish sentences or thoughts: conversation may seem disjointed and incomplete, making it difficult to understand their message if the context is not established.
- Social skills difficulties and problematic behaviour: problems with social skills because others do not understand them.
- Age-appropriate IQ but has academic difficulties: as academic demands increase the lack of language processing can affect how much they learn and at what pace.

Helping the child

- Speak slowly and clearly and use simple sentences to convey information and write the main concepts on board.
- Allow use of tape recorder for note-taking.
- Provide individual support persons or peer tutors.
- Use visualisation techniques to enhance listening and comprehension and graphic organisers for note-taking.
- Give simple, direct and individual directions in small chunks, and get the child's attention before giving direction and speak clearly facing the child.
- Allow extra time for processing and understanding information.

- Ask the child to restate what he heard. This allows the speaker to identify errors and help the child correct them.
- Establish predictable routines, both at home and in school.

Other strategies at *Learning Aspiration*

When a child faces any of these challenges, most often, she or he is labelled as lazy and disinterested, even if the child is excellent in some other field. This can result in low self-esteem.

At *Learning Aspiration*, we use strategies that are opportunities for children to work on what is interesting. It could be a game or dance or theatre or art and craft as part of our teaching methods. For example, the life cycle of a butterfly is taught with the help of craft activity. Mughal history is taught through theatre. We use songs and music to teach grammar and puppets for Hindi story-telling. Board games and card games are very popular and have been successfully used. Learning by doing is the base of teaching at *Learning Aspiration*.

These are some of the benefits a child gets with all the performing arts and games and sports. The list of benefits can be endless. And we have seen miraculous changes in the area of academic learning of our students.

We believe children with SLD can lead their lives with excellence, what they need is an appropriate and enriching environment to exercise their strengths to overcome their challenges.



Arpita Yadav is the mother of a young adult with multiple disabilities. She studied Special Education in Delhi and believes in the natural and holistic way of learning where each child can learn as per his or her own abilities and pace. She is the Academic Director, *Learning Aspiration*, a school for children with learning disabilities that aims at providing an enriching environment to students who cannot cope with the mainstream school system. She may be contacted at arpita34@gmail.com