

Learning Difficulties and Behaviour Problems: When Trying Harder Just Isn't Enough

Did you know that children with undiagnosed learning difficulties may develop behavioural problems that can mask the struggles they are experiencing every day at school? These behavioural problems can include angry outbursts, silliness, chatting excessively, or even defiance, but sometimes there is a lot more going on than just a naughty child. Imagine being called on in class to read aloud, but the letters on the page seem to be backwards or in a language you can barely recognize. Stumbling over words in front of their classmates can be so embarrassing that some children resort to distracting the class with inappropriate comments or “bad behaviour” that serves to hide the fact they cannot read. Sometimes it feels better to be scolded for bad behaviour than to be seen as unable to do what everyone else seems to do so easily.

An undiagnosed reading problem is just one example of a learning problem that can be frustrating and embarrassing for a child who may be very intelligent and capable in every other way, but there are many ways that children can be struggling to learn. Some children have a problem with working memory, a type of memory that helps us remember several things that we need to do while we work on completing each task. If you ask a child with working memory problems to do three things for you, that child may only remember to do one task. This can look like carelessness or even defiance, but sometimes it is a poor memory that is causing the problem. So, if you have a child that never seems to remember to put the toilet seat down no matter how often you tell him to do it, or comes downstairs bringing only one of the three things you asked her to get, it is possible your child has a problem with working memory.

Understanding your child’s behaviour and diagnosing any underlying learning difficulties is something a school psychologist or psychological associate can do through a series of tests, interviews, and questionnaires called a *psychoeducational assessment*. Sometimes the school will recommend this kind of assessment for a child and will be able to arrange with the school’s psychological consultant to provide the assessment without any cost to the family, but normally, each school is only able to arrange a relatively small number of assessments each year due to budget constraints. If your child is having learning or behaviour problems but the school is unable to provide an assessment, you may want to purchase a psychoeducational assessment for your child from a registered psychologist or psychological associate in your community. A good assessment by a qualified practitioner will identify your child’s learning strengths and weakness, any emotional difficulties such as low self-esteem or anxiety, and will provide recommendations to help your child do his or her best at school. A complete psychoeducational assessment requires many hours of effort as well as a lot of skill and experience, so this can be expensive for some families. But if you have extended health coverage for psychological services through your benefit plan at work, you may be able to recover some or all of the cost of the assessment. This can be an excellent investment in your child’s future academic success.

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