

Issues in Determining Learning Disabilities

“Learning disability” is a catch all term that describes problems with the acquisition, understanding and expression of information. It is important to note that other terms are also used that refer to basically the same thing. Thus, dyslexia, reading disorder, processing disorders and so forth, are all referring to some form of learning disability. Since we use all of our senses to gather information, a learning disability can affect how we use a particular sense, how we organize the information that passes to the brain and then how we use the information.

Learning disability is different from, but related to intelligence. Intelligence refers to the ability to reason, problem solve, plan and use judgment, which in turn may depend on the information acquired. Hence one can at the same time be intelligent but may have difficulty with the acquisition, understanding and use of information.

Because a learning disability may relate to a specific issue, all other abilities can still be intact – much like having poor eyesight, but great hearing. Thus, when all the abilities and disabilities are added up, a person can still appear “normal on average”. The issue is that when we need a particular ability (e.g., reading) and it is not there, a problem becomes evident. If you are concerned about a learning disability, psychoeducational assessment will be necessary.

Problems identifying learning disabilities occur with situations that are not immediately obvious, situations that are more complex or where the person’s other strengths help to “mask” or hide the learning disability. Thus, issues can arise when interpreting the results of psychoeducational tests. If one only looks at the “surface” or overall scores then problems can be missed. Hence, more than overall scores are required to understand problems in depth. Specifics must be addressed too.

In other cases, some persons test at least average on all areas, but with far greater abilities in specific areas. So while the person tests “normal”,

the difference in abilities can cause the person to feel a problem when having to rely upon a weaker area. This is like having two good legs, but with one longer than the other. Both are inherently good, yet the person will still limp because of the differences between them.

There is a wealth of information that psychoeducational tests provide. Knowing how to interpret test scores requires both training and experience. Without both, the consumer is not getting the full benefit of an assessment.

Not properly identifying a learning disability can have negative effects, which include academic struggles being taken as “attitude” rather than the disability. This in turn can lead to conflict, upset and reduced self-esteem, not to mention ongoing academic problems.

While most psychologists can provide the testing, it is the experienced psychologist who can interpret the results and even make sense of learning problems where the person seems otherwise “normal or average”. Sometimes you need to look for what isn’t obvious or be able to understand issues arising from good scores, but where there are still substantial differences.

If you or your child has had a psychoeducational assessment and problems remain, it may be time to revisit the results and dig deeper. The problem isn’t always obvious.

Gary Direnfeld, MSW, RSW
(905) 628-4847
gary@yoursocialworker.com
<http://www.yoursocialworker.com>

Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert on child development, parent-child relations, marital and family therapy, custody and access recommendations, social work and an expert for the purpose of giving a critique on a Section 112 (social work) report. Call him for your next conference and for expert opinion on family matters. Services include counselling, mediation, assessment, assessment critiques and workshops.

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<http://www.oakvillepsychologist.com>