

Learning Differences & Disabilities



A common assumption is that children who learn differently or have diagnosed learning disabilities cannot achieve success and should be held to a lower standard. This is a false assumption. With appropriate support, they can achieve success academically, socially and emotionally and reach their potential both in and out of school.

The terms “learning difference” and “learning disability” often are used interchangeably. However, there are important distinctions to understand. Access to services can be contingent upon meeting specific criteria, and clarity around how these terms are used and defined within educational and legal systems is essential.

Learning Differences & Disabilities Explained

Learning differences are not diagnosable disorders but rather differences in how individuals learn and think best. In many circumstances, they are considered departures from the “norm”. Teachers and parents can gather important information about learning differences through observation and communication with the student both in and out of school. Details on preferred learning styles, modalities, and environments that align with the student’s abilities and learning differences also are commonly found within recommendations on neuro-psychological and psycho-educational evaluations.

On the contrary, learning disabilities are diagnosable. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) provides legal protections for students with disabilities and defines them as “a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations,

including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia”. Support and services may be contingent upon a qualifying diagnosis.

Learning differences and learning disabilities do not necessarily compromise a student’s ability to achieve in school unless left unaddressed or unsupported. Appropriately addressing them is an important part of supporting struggling students, but it must be done with care. Although quite common, concentrating on a student’s differences or disabilities distracts teachers and parents from helping them develop their strengths and reach their potential. This can be a frustrating experience for the student. Fostering a student’s abilities and strengths is essential to helping them build the confidence and self-esteem needed to overcome their challenges and show what they can really do.

Although stigma around learning differences and learning disabilities persists, appreciation and understanding of neuro and cognitive diversity are on the rise. Contrary to traditional one-size-fits-all approaches to learning, many schools have broadened their scope for teaching and learning to better engage with all learners through strength and talent-based approaches.



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Characteristics of Learning Differences & Disabilities

Academic challenges for students with learning differences and disabilities are common yet can be effectively addressed by matching them with the right learning options. Because learning styles can vary, investigating how a student learns best is a great place to start:

- **Learners with Visual** strengths benefit from depictions of information on maps, diagrams, graphs, flow charts, hierarchies, and symbols.
- **Learners with Auditory** strengths learn best from lectures, group discussions, audio recordings, email exchanges, speaking, web-chats, and talking through concepts and material.
- Learners with strength in **reading** and **writing** benefit from information displayed as words through text-based input and output in all forms including manuals, reports and essays.
- **Learners with kinesthetic** strengths benefit from experiences through real-world and simulation, movies, documentaries, case studies.

Access to specialized services and accommodations may be dependent upon the diagnosis of learning disabilities. Evaluation by a licensed professional is the best way to determine if diagnoses such as the following apply;

- Dyslexia
- Dysgraphia
- Dyscalculia
- Auditory processing disorder
- Nonverbal learning disorder
- Other health impairments, including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Autism spectrum disorder (ASD)
- Anxiety disorder, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and depression
- Speech or language impairments
- Visual impairment
- Deafness and hearing impairments
- Orthopedic impairment resulting in lack of function or ability in the body, such as cerebral palsy
- Intellectual disability
- Traumatic brain injury caused by an accident or physical force

Serving Students

For parents and teachers working with struggling students who do not have diagnosed learning disabilities, collaborating to identify learning preferences and ideal environments that position the student to tap into their strengths and talents, especially when things are challenging, is time well spent. Documenting and sharing successful strategies over time is especially helpful for transitions to new learning environments and for empowering students to begin advocating for themselves.

For students with diagnosed learning disabilities, protections lie within the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and U.S. Civil Rights law, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Depending on the diagnosis, individualized education programs (IEPs) or 504 plans are essential to providing needed supports in school. Both are legal documents that serve as a written plan for special education instruction and services or accommodations that take place in the regular classroom. Both are to be provided at no cost to the family and should outline specific supports and services that must be made available to the student. For more information, see Resources below.

Resources for Parents & Educators

- 2e News
- Bright & Quirky
- National Association for Gifted Children
- Wrightslaw.com
- Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)
- Section 504 of Rehabilitation Act of 1973
- Summit Center
- Supporting the Emotional Needs of the Gifted (SENG)

About Summit Center

Summit Center, founded by Drs. Daniel B. Peters and Susan Daniels, provides educational and comprehensive assessments, consultations, and counseling for children, teens, adults, and families. We work with clients who are neurodiverse, gifted, talented, twice-exceptional (have both gifted and less developed abilities), and/or are asynchronous in their development. Summit Center has assembled an expert team of professionals and specialists dedicated to using a strengths-based approach to help our clients reach their fullest developmental potential.