

How to Handle Students With Learning Disabilities

2

Today's child is tomorrow's future.

—Maryln Appelbaum

This topic has very a special meaning for me because two close family members were both labeled with learning disabilities (LD). They are both adults now, and while they had many struggles they had to overcome as children, they are now both successful in their lives. I share this story at the beginning of this chapter because, even though having LD can be devastating, there is hope.

Individuals with LD have a neurological impairment that mixes up signals between the brain and the senses (Winebrenner, 2006). Students with LD may have an average or above-average intelligence. They can see and hear, but they do it differently. They have a neurological impairment in perception, conceptualization, language, memory, attention, or motor control. LD affects approximately five percent of students (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

Here is an exercise that I use at the beginning of every seminar in which I teach about LD. I have the audience members pair up and say the alphabet backwards. Then I have them do it again, but with a twist. They have to say the alphabet backwards, and between each letter, they must insert the name of a city, country, or state that does not begin with those two letters (e.g., “Z, California, Y”).

20 • How to Handle the Hard-to-Handle Student

Audience members all flounder, grin sheepishly, and say that this task is very difficult. I then explain that this is how learning feels for students with LD. Learning something new is this difficult and frustrating for students with LD.

Students hear the sounds, but their brains may mix up the signals. The same is true for what they see. For example, the sentence, “The train goes fast” may look to students with LD like, “The rain goes fast.” They may omit just one letter, totally changing the context. They may omit an entire word, and the sentence could read, “The goes fast.” Words may be blurred so that they are hard to read. Every time they read the same sentence or word, it can change again.

Students with LD may also have problems with long-term memory. They may struggle to learn a concept like a math fact and then later forget it. It is erased to the point that it does not seem like it was ever learned. If all of this appears frustrating to teachers, it is even more frustrating for students. Students struggle with feeling like they are dumb, even though they are actually bright. They often suffer from low self-esteem because of feeling like failures in school. Nearly 40 percent of students with LD drop out of school (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). They need strategies to help them feel successful and people to believe in them.

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCEEDING WITH STUDENTS WITH LD

You can help students with LD. The first step is to recognize that these students are not lazy or unmotivated. They have a real disability. They may become unmotivated if they continue to fail. Your task is to help keep them motivated by finding strategies that work.

Strategies for ADHD

Many of the strategies suggested in the previous chapter apply to students with LD. They, too, benefit from all of the organizational strategies as well as other strategies. Review the strategies for ADHD and use them with your students who have LD.

Note Taker

When students with LD take notes, they often can't read their own writing, misspell words, leave out words, and have very little to show for their efforts. It is then difficult for them to use those notes to study for

tests. Assign someone who takes good class notes to take notes for the other student. Give the note taker carbonless paper and put an extra sheet of paper underneath the page, so that whenever they write, they are automatically making two pages. Assign students who you know like helping others as note takers. Make sure that students with LD are not embarrassed by having someone else take notes. If they are embarrassed, have the notes taken anonymously so that note takers do not know who will be receiving the notes.

Testing

Allow students who struggle with completing tests under a timetable to take tests in a separate room or at a different time. Have someone read the test questions to the student. This can dramatically improve test scores because now the student with LD knows exactly what is being asked. The student sees the visual test and hears the test questions so that both auditory and visual modes of learning are accommodated.

Reading Strategies

Because reading is often a real problem with students with LD, it is important to have a bag of tricks to help students succeed.

Reading Aloud

Have students read aloud to a study buddy. This is preferable to students making mistakes while reading silently and not even knowing they are making the mistakes. Reading aloud to a study buddy also helps them to stay focused and avoid distractions.

Tracing With Fingers or Highlighter

Students with LD often lose their place as they read. There are strategies you can use to help them keep their place. Erasable highlighters can be found in office supply stores. Still another way of highlighting without an actual highlighter is to teach students to trace words with their fingers as they read. This helps them keep their place on the page.

Word Windows

Use word windows, which can typically be purchased inexpensively at teacher supply stores, to help students stay focused. They are small, lami-

22 • How to Handle the Hard-to-Handle Student

nated, rectangular sheets that fit on a regular page in a book or in a notebook. A transparent opening in the center allows students to see only one line on the page to help them focus on the passage they are reading. This transparent opening typically is yellow or blue, a color that serves as a highlighter to help students keep their place as they read.

Colored Transparencies

One simple correction that helps many students read better is placing colored transparent sheets of paper over students' reading material. Suddenly, words that were blurred and jumbled on white paper become clearer and easier to read. Different students need different colors of transparent sheets. Inexpensive sheets are often available at a scrapbooking store, and you can purchase a variety of colors to determine which colors work best for students.

Show the different colors to students with LD who have problems reading. Place them on top of pages of white paper with black print. Ask the students to tell you which colors work best. Many students choose yellow, but other students may choose another color. Once you know the color that helps the child, you can recommend that parents buy glasses with lenses in that color. Transparent sheets may become blurry with hand and fingerprints. Lenses in the glasses can be more easily cleaned.

Audio Assists

Whenever possible, provide verbal assists. Audio tapes of books and even instructions can help students. A study buddy who reads to the student is another audio assist. Ideally, combine both the visual with the auditory assist. Students follow along in their texts visually as they hear the words read out loud.

E-Books and Recorded Books

Some students have a difficult time reading print, yet they do better with e-books. Other students do well listening to recorded books. Discover the way each of your students learns best, and you will have gone a long way to helping them succeed.

Phonemic Awareness and Phonics Activities

Do phonemic awareness lessons and phonics activities with students at all levels. This is an area of weakness for many students with LD. The more they practice, the better they generally can perform.

Spelling Strategies

If reading does not come naturally, neither does spelling. Students with LD need assistance to be more successful at spelling.

Repeat Words

Have students slowly repeat words as they spell. This helps them to identify the connections between sounds and letters. Have them repeat the word several times to themselves until they can hear individual sounds.

First Three Letters

Teach students to look at the first three letters of a word before they say the word. They often only look at the first letter and guess at the word. This simple little trick teaches them to look more closely at the word.

Tactfulness

Be tactful. When students make an error, instead of immediately correcting them, offer corrections in a more positive manner. Instead of saying, “That’s wrong, Jeff,” say, “Let me show you another way to read this.” These are students who easily feel like failures. The more they feel like they cannot succeed, the more they really cannot succeed. Your words can help ease the discomfort of making a mistake. Your voice tone is as important as your words. When they hear “I believe in you—you can do this,” in your voice, it helps them to believe in themselves, too.

Fun and Interesting Books

Have you ever read a book that you just could not put down? You read and read and read, putting off doing other things. The book had you totally hooked. Finding a fascinating book is important for students with LD during independent reading time. It can be a huge chore for them to read something that is not interesting. Find out what interests them, and offer them books and articles to read in their area of interest.

Michael was one of my students with LD. He hated reading. He struggled with his schoolwork and often did not finish assignments. I discovered that he was interested in fish. He had a fish tank at home and knew the names of and interesting details about each of the fish. The first time I gave him a book to read about aquariums, he read it quickly. I used that book as a jump start to get him engaged in other topics the class was

24 • How to Handle the Hard-to-Handle Student

studying. When we had a geography lesson about Alaska, I had him research what types of fish were native to Alaska. You can use this strategy with your students; find their hooks, their subjects of interest, and build on them.

Penmanship

Students with LD often have trouble with penmanship. They may make reversals and have difficulty with handwriting.

Visual Strip

Students often reverse letters or numerals. One effective strategy is to attach a visual strip to the student's desk so there is a model for the letters or numbers that give the student trouble. The students look at the letters on the visual strip and copy them.

Hidden Answers

There may be another reason for the reversals. I had a student in my school named Cory. He was a good-natured, short, and chubby kindergarten. Cory's dad was the president of a large bank and was used to telling people what to do and how to do it. He was frustrated with Cory's reversals, especially with the letters *b* and *d*. I met with Cory's father at a teacher conference. He told me he had practiced and practiced with Cory, but Cory still kept making reversals. He said that Cory even used to write with his left hand and that it took him months to get Cory to use his right hand. He was pleased that Cory was finally using his right hand after months of nagging.

The next day, I decided to do an experiment with Cory. I gave him a sheet of paper and told him to write some words that had the letters *b* and *d* sprinkled throughout. I told him that this time, I wanted him to write with his left hand. At first, he did not want to use his left hand. He told me that his dad told him not to use it. Finally, he agreed for that one time to use his left hand. Cory copied the words perfectly with no reversals at all. I called his dad and told him what happened, and he agreed that from that time on, Cory could use his left hand. Cory never had any further problems with reversals.

Over the course of the years, this reoccurred several times with other students. When it did not work, I provided a model for students on the desk. I also had the letters written on a piece of paper with arrows showing where to start. Students traced the letters over and over again until it became second nature to write the letters correctly.

Prepare the Hand

One of the most important strategies for teaching students to write is to prepare the hand. Look at your hand right now as you are reading this. Pretend to hold a pencil. You are holding together your thumb, forefinger, and middle finger. Those are called “pincer fingers,” which are the fingers that grip a pencil or pen. The more you prepare students to use those fingers, the better they will be able to write.

An excellent exercise for the pincer fingers is tonging. You will need two same-sized small soup bowls, a pair of tongs, a sponge cut into small pieces, and a tray that holds all of the items. Fill the bowl on the left with the cut-up pieces of sponge. The bowl on the right is empty. Demonstrate slowly taking the tongs and moving one sponge at a time from the right bowl to the left bowl. When you are finished, turn the tray so that the full bowl is once again on the left. Make sure students always use the tongs from left to right, because you are indirectly training their eyes to go from left to right. That is the way students read a book and write—from left to right.

Once students have mastered tonging using large tongs, replace the tongs with tweezers and smaller objects. Students use the tweezers to move smaller objects from the bowl on the left to a bowl on the right.

The more those pincer fingers are developed, the better students will write. It is similar to developing muscles when going to a gym. Several years ago, my son and daughter-in-law bought me a gym membership for my birthday. When I went to the gym, the trainers started me with very small weights. Gradually, over time, they gave me larger and larger weights. First, I had to learn how to handle the weights, how to hold them, and how to lift them. It is the same with teaching writing. The hand needs to be prepared before students can lift those pencils or pens and begin writing.

Tracing

When students are ready to start writing, have them trace the letter with their fingers. Have them practice making letters on a chalkboard, where the letters can be easily erased. When they have mastered the chalkboard, they are ready to write their letters on a sheet of paper.

Math Strategies

Math is a subject that students with LD may find a struggle. It is important to help students feel successful. Every school has its own math program, so these strategies are meant to help you help your students succeed within the programs you have already implemented.

26 • How to Handle the Hard-to-Handle Student

Making Math Concrete

Learning math involves taking an abstract concept and making it concrete in the minds of students. The best way to teach math is to use manipulatives that students can see, feel, and count. They need to be able to see what different numbers look like. That is why so many students count on their fingers. Those students are actually saying to you, “I learn best when I see, feel, and touch the numbers.” The more concretely you teach math, the more easily students will learn.

Counting as a Foundation

You can learn to read without memorizing the alphabet, but it is impossible to do any math operations without knowing how to count. Students need to learn one-to-one correspondence. They have to learn that what they are saying corresponds to objects. Ask them to hand you one of an object. Have them take two objects and place them somewhere. Count whenever possible in your classroom. Count students as they line up. Count desks in the room. Count the days of the week. Count the hands of how many students have pets at home. Have students join you as you count. The more they count, the better prepared they will be for mathematical operations.

Whole Body Math

To teach a number line, have students line up. Tell them they are standing on 0. Have them move one step to the right. Now tell them they are standing on 1. Have them take three more steps to the right. Tell them they are standing on 4. Because they are using their bodies to count, students get this. They see it, feel it, and understand it. The more multisensory experiences you use, the better students can learn (Winebrenner, 2006).

Multiplication Tables

Students often have a tough time learning their multiplication tables, which are the basis for so many more operations. Provide students with a CD of the multiplication tables set to music and have them sing and clap their way through the tables. That is a good way for them to memorize the tables. If you have access to concrete objects, use those to teach the multiplication tables.

Divide Sheets

Working math problems can be overwhelming for some students to whom math does not come easily. Have students fold their sheets of paper

in half when doing an assignment, so they only see the top half first. When they are finished, they work through the bottom half of the page. This makes the work more palatable for students.

Color Coding

Color code operational words like add, subtract, multiply, and divide. When students need to add, they use red pencils. For other operations, they use a different colored pencil. This helps them remember what they are supposed to do. When students start to work division problems with multiple operations, give them each a problem with colored blanks so they know which operation to do next.

Learner's Remorse

Always assess math learning in a way that separates it from the student's language ability. Students may know the answers for math but may not be able to read written directions or understand oral directions to do the problems. Make sure that students know what you need them to do. When you are in doubt about a student's comprehension of instructions, have that student work only one problem. If you see the student is on track, the student continues to do more. This practice prevents learner's remorse. This is a term I use for when students learn a task incorrectly and repeat it incorrectly several times. After students repeat a task incorrectly, unlearning the habit and relearning it correctly is difficult. They have learner's remorse, which can sour them for future learning.

A CONCLUDING STORY

Many years ago I had a college professor who told us a story about his graduating class. He said that he was part of a large graduating class, but the person who got the highest grades in his class was a student with LD. That student had more of one ingredient than all the other students did. He did not have the highest IQ, the most financial wealth, or the best looks. He had something better than all the others, and it was motivation. That motivation kept him searching to find ways to succeed, to graduate at the top of his class. You, too, can do this for your students. You can give them the motivation that they need to succeed. Believe in them. See something that they do not yet see. And after a while, they will see it, too!