

The CCRI worked with the [Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law](#) to produce this Fact Sheet in 2017. Please note that this document only offers an overview and simply serves as a starting point in considering the impacts of a particular condition on an individual. This Fact Sheet does not provide the level of detail, citations, medical terminology, or full diagnostic criteria that an expert or medical professional would need to make a diagnosis or that a lawyer would need to have to advocate most effectively on behalf of her client.

## Specific Learning Disorder

Specific learning disorders (SLDs) are defined as impairments to one or more basic cognitive processes involved in understanding or using language that can manifest as difficulties listening, thinking, concentrating, speaking, reading, writing, spelling, or doing mathematical calculations. SLDs are diagnosed based on a variety of cognitive manifestations, including an inability to perform on a level appropriate for the person's intelligence and age. Learning disorders cause significant interference with academic or occupational performance, and day-to-day functioning.

### Signs of a Learning Disorder

According to the DSM-5, someone with a learning disorder will exhibit one or more of the following:

- Difficulty reading: inaccurate or slow and effortful reading, reading aloud incorrectly or slowly, guessing at words, difficulty sounding words out.
- Difficulty understanding what is read.
- Difficulty with spelling.
- Difficulty with writing: making grammatical or punctuation errors, using poor paragraph organization, ideas lacking clarity.
- Difficulty understanding numbers, text describing numbers or percentages, or calculations: counts on fingers, doesn't understand number relationships, is confused while computing numbers or changes computation methods mid-computation.
- Difficulty with mathematical reasoning: having severe difficulty applying mathematical concepts, facts, or procedures to solve problems.

### Types of Learning Disorders

Classifications of different types of learning disorders (such as Auditory Processing Disorder (APD), Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, Dyscalculia, Language Processing Disorder, Non-Verbal Learning Disabilities, Visual Perceptual/ Visual Motor Deficit) are no longer included in the DSM-5 because previous classifications were overly narrow and specific which caused many people with learning disorders to go undiagnosed and untreated. The DSM-5 now just has one overall diagnosis of SLD that incorporates all deficits that impact academic achievement, including:

#### *Impairments in reading:*

Impairments in reading fluency, word accuracy, and reading comprehension. Dyslexia is still considered to be an alternative term for this specifier, and is generally characterized by problems with reading accuracy fluency, poor spelling and decoding.

### *Impairment in mathematics:*

Including impairments in number sense, memorizing arithmetic facts, calculation accuracy or fluency, and mathematical reasoning accuracy. Dyscalculia is still considered to be an alternative term for this specifier and is generally characterized by problems with processing numerical information, learning arithmetic facts, and calculation accuracy or fluency.

### *Impairment in writing:*

Including impairments in spelling accuracy, grammar and punctuation accuracy, and clarity or organization of writing.

## **How a Learning Disorder Might Impact Behavior**

It is important to note that SLDs are not just conditions affecting academic performance in school; they also impair social learning, which can be important to decision making throughout life. People with SLDs may experience/exhibit:

- Challenges filling out forms.
- Difficulties communicating with or understanding others
- Difficulties expressing themselves.
- Difficulties remembering or concentrating.
- Impaired social skills, social awareness, or ability to accurately read gestures, expressions, or social cues.
- Lower self-esteem.
- Increased suggestibility/may be more easily influenced by others.
- Challenges with self-control, or impulse control.
- Impaired decision making or ability to plan.
- Difficulties understanding or predicting the consequences of their behavior.

In court, people with SLDs may have difficulties assisting in their own defense, and might experience harsher sentencing because of “inappropriate” behaviors or attitudes.

People with SLDs have higher rates of school dropout and unemployment. People with SLD sometimes develop what is referred to as “learned helplessness”, which is a sense of powerlessness that results from persistent failure to succeed. People with learned helplessness may believe that it is pointless to try to succeed or conform to social norms because personal history has clearly demonstrated that, regardless of the amount of effort exerted, success is impossible. Learned helplessness can lead to apathy and depression.

It can be frustrating and overwhelming to have an SLD. Such feelings may lead to behaviors such as defiance, “lashing out”, not listening, or “shutting down.” “Bad behavior” may also develop as a way to avoid difficult or frustrating tasks, or because a person with an SLD is the target of bullying in school.

People with SLDs are also more likely to get in trouble at school or with the law. They experience higher rates of disciplinary action and expulsion in schools, not just because of SLD-related behavioral problems, but also because many schools are unable or unwilling to teach students with SLD. Poor social skills or abrasive manners may lead to harsher or more frequent responses to minor infractions. People with SLDs tend to be treated differently, and more harshly, in the

criminal justice system as well; they experience higher rates of arrest and incarceration, and longer or more severe punishments, than do persons without SLDs.

### **Resources for Additional Information**

- Psych Center: <http://psychcentral.com/disorders/specific-learning-disorder/>
- Nancy Coward, *Disorganized Crime: Learning Disability and The Criminal Justice System*, 13 Criminal Justice 2, 11-16 (1998).
- Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5), American Psychiatric Association, "Specific Learning Disorder," p. 66.