

Talking LD

coordinated campaign
for learning disabilities

ccld

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TALKING LD

Talking LD is a resource for advocates to help them frame their messages in ways that will mobilize support for children with learning disabilities and enact public policies that can help them. It is published by the Coordinated Campaign for Learning Disabilities (CCLD), which seeks to educate and mobilize parents of young children to recognize the warning signs of learning disabilities and, if needed, encourage them to seek help immediately. Extensive public opinion research funded by the Emily Hall Tremain Foundation points to continuing, profound and dangerous misconceptions that must be overcome if children are to receive the help they need and deserve in order to be successful in life.

This booklet covers the issues CCLD believes are among the most important and makes research-based recommendations about the messages we think will be most persuasive. CCLD is hopeful that *Talking LD* will be used by the ever-widening audience of advocates and activists who work on behalf of people with learning disabilities.

Starting in 1994, CCLD began an ongoing assessment of public opinion about learning disabilities. With funding from the Emily Hall Tremain Foundation, two Roper Starch national opinion surveys were conducted in 1994 and 1999. Numerous focus groups also have been conducted across the United States among parents, teachers, school administrators, pediatricians and students with learning disabilities. Additional research has been conducted by some of the member organizations of CCLD and the Ad Council.

Talking LD is not an exhaustive reference because adequate public opinion research does not exist on many of the subjects and issues affecting people with learning disabilities. Rather, it is a compilation of recommendations about how to address the most common issues raised in the public conversation about learning disabilities.

LANGUAGE MATTERS

Why does language matter? Because the choice of words can radically change the outcome of a debate. Too often advocates feel that repeating truthful statements will convince people to do the right thing. But there are many things that, while true, are not believable or not acceptable. People strongly hold many misconceptions that cannot easily be overturned by facts or efforts by advocates to “disprove” these preconceived ideas or strongly held values. And sometimes a poor choice of words can actually tune out or turn-off the very people we must reach.

In fact, polls and focus groups show that some messages presented by learning disabilities advocates are counter-productive to mobilizing support. One excellent example is the common practice of “bragging” about the superior performance of various celebrities with dyslexia. Many learning disabilities groups try to ease the anxiety of children and parents by talking about people with dyslexia like Sir Winston Churchill, Former Vice President Nelson Rockefeller or even actor/singer Cher. But focus groups of teens and parents conducted by CCLD showed that this practice is off-putting to many who find little in common with these “superstars.” Advocates are advised, therefore, not to focus much attention on these people, but rather to talk about real-life success stories that are more accessible to the audiences they are trying to reach.

CCLD doesn't suggest only saying things that people agree with—but we don't want to lose potential supporters by using ideas they fundamentally reject, either. *Talking LD* offers advice about approaches we think will be most constructive in moving people to take action and avoiding pitfalls that are likely to alienate them.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD MESSAGE?

Creating an effective message requires adhering to some core principles. An effective message is:

- **True.** It is factually correct and can withstand attack from opponents.
- **Believable.** Many things that are true are not believable. Advocates should use messages that people can actually accept.
- **Emotionally resonant.** Good messages do not simply state facts. People are moved by their emotions and messages should tap this vein.
- **Compatible with people's pre-conceived understanding of the problem.** If people harbor a strong view about the nature of a problem, they will be more likely to disbelieve contrary views.
- **Values-based.** Good messages tap into widely held values such as caring for one's family, being responsible to others, etc.
- **Short.** A good message should be said in 7.5 seconds to conform to television and radio standards.
- **Repeated.** Any message that works should be repeated for years to ensure that people hear it and incorporate it into their belief systems.

PROBLEM, SOLUTION, ACTION

Advocates are encouraged to have three key message points to use in addressing any audience, especially when handling media interviews. One way of grouping them is to think about: 1) a statement of a problem, 2) a solution to the problem and 3) an action message. Never fail to provide the action message once you “have the floor.” People want and need to know what to do to address the problem you have spelled out.

The key messages of CCLD are:

1. *Face the facts.*

- Many children who are struggling in school have learning disabilities that need to be addressed.
- If you see your child having trouble learning how to read or write (or expressing him/herself verbally), doing math or organizing schoolwork, he or she may have a learning disability.
- Children with learning disabilities are just as smart as or smarter than others, they just learn differently.

2. *Find the answer.*

- There’s no cure for learning disabilities, but children can be taught to compensate for them with early diagnosis and proper instruction.
- If children with learning disabilities are helped in the early grades, most of them can find success and perform as well as other students.
- We can solve 90 percent of reading problems if we intervene appropriately by the end of the second grade, but success rates decline dramatically if we wait.

3. *Fight the fear.*

- Don’t be afraid of learning disabilities. Be afraid of what can happen if you don’t get help for your child.
- If your child is having a serious problem (struggling) in school—talk to her or his teacher or a school administrator right away.
- Get the information you need on the Web at www.aboutld.org or by calling 1-888-GR8-MIND.

BUILD A WORD BRIDGE

In communications, the most basic rule is to know what you want to say—have a message you want people to remember—and then make sure you say it. Too often, in our haste or anxiety about answering a question, we forget or can't find a way to get across what we need to communicate. It is critical that advocates learn how to "bridge" between the question that is asked and the points they want to make. If advocates are asked questions that do not allow them to readily present their message points, they should bridge to information that serves their goals by using phrases such as:

- Good question—but the real issue [or question] is...
- What I would like to focus on is...
- That's an interesting point, but the one I would stress is...
- The heart of the matter is...
- What I am usually asked is...
- Let me come back to that in a minute...
- This is such an important point...and another point is...

Watch people on television news reports to obtain other ideas about how to bridge effectively to the message you want to make.

WHAT THE PUBLIC KNOWS

According to a 1999 Roper public opinion poll, more than one-third of U.S. parents (41%) claim to have heard or read a lot about learning disabilities. Due to various public education efforts, public awareness of learning disabilities is growing and polls show that the public's misperceptions are waning. But they are far from being overcome.

While roughly eight in 10 adults agree with CCLD's definition of learning disabilities: "People with learning disabilities are just as smart as you and I—their minds just process words and information differently," two-thirds still associate learning disabilities with mental retardation and with physical disabilities such as blindness (38%) and deafness (45%) (Roper, 1999).

Positively, people's association of learning disabilities with mental retardation has dropped 20 points from 1994 to 1999. But almost half think that learning disabilities are actually a result of laziness. About half think that learning disabilities are caused by "the home environment," even after they are given a correct definition of learning disabilities (Roper, 1999).

A major challenge remains in that many people believe that a number of the common warning signs of learning disabilities are not "a serious problem" and that children will just "grow out of it." Clearly a measure of the long-term success of any advocacy effort will be an increase in the number of people who know what signs to look for and understand that children with learning disabilities are not likely to improve academically without appropriate help.

Most parents today say they would discuss their suspicions of any serious problem with their child's physician and/or teachers. But seeking professional help is delayed by far too many for far too long, often beyond the time for optimal academic intervention.

What the Public Knows (continued)

One of the biggest problems in educating Americans about learning disabilities lies in the name “learning disabilities” itself. The term may be too vague or conjure up the wrong imagery. People have been conditioned to think about “disabilities” in terms of physical disabilities. This would account for connecting “learning disabilities” with deafness and blindness and perhaps retardation. When people say that a person with a learning disability is a “slow learner,” are they speaking pejoratively or just reflecting the reality that it may, in fact, take someone with a learning disability longer to learn? We just don’t know.

The word “dyslexia” is better understood than “learning disability,” but this is just one type of learning disability. This said, it is important to note that dyslexia is also misunderstood, as it is often described by reporters as a disorder causing people to reverse letters and/or numbers.

Alternative phrases that exclude “disability” and all its connotations have led advocates to substitute “learning disorder,” or “learning difference.” But research shows this seems to make little impact on perceptions. If anything, alternative descriptions, like “learning difficulties” or “learning differences” soften the intensity of concern among parents and grandparents who are more likely to take seriously a “learning disability” (Roper, 1994).

Because of laws such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the “learning disabilities” label is sometimes needed to unlock resources to ensure that eligible students receive special education services in public schools. For this reason, CCLD believes advocates should use the term until such time that every student needing special services has access to them.

STIGMA STALLS PARENTS

It will come as no surprise to advocates for people with learning disabilities that there is a stigma attached to the problem. There are many negative stereotypes associated with “disabilities” of all kinds. Of greatest concern is how the stigma immobilizes some parents who would otherwise seek help for a child struggling in school. Stigma also impacts employment practices, self-esteem and the way teachers address children with learning disabilities in the classroom.

The stigma of learning disabilities is so powerful that **48 percent** of parents conclude that, in the long run, being labeled “learning disabled” causes children and adults more trouble than if they struggle privately with their learning problems (Roper, 1999). This leads many parents to delay seeking help for a child they suspect has a learning disability because they believe the label is worse than leaving the problem unaddressed—when nothing could be further from the truth.

This seeming denial of the problem is even more pronounced among fathers—particularly the well-educated—whose opposition to labeling is so prevalent that they would first try to address their child’s learning issues at home, rather than seek professional help.

Other data shows that the public is aware that people coping with learning disabilities suffer pain and humiliation because of discrimination, and that they are sometimes fired despite good performance once an employer becomes aware of the learning disability.

The bottom line is that de-stigmatizing learning disabilities is key to ensuring that more young people get full access to education and employment.

- **Emphasizing** the neurological (not moral or parental) basis—a difference in the “wiring” of the brain—of the problem.
- **De-linking** learning disabilities from mental retardation, which means helping people understand that people with learning disabilities have average to above average intelligence.
- **Letting parents** know that children with learning disabilities can succeed just as well as their classmates if they get the help they need and deserve.
- **Improving** educational and social skills for young people with learning disabilities.
- **Helping** people “get to know” others with learning disabilities through expanded communications about the problem.

KEY MESSAGES

What follows are messages, grouped around major topics that spokespeople and advocates are often asked by the media to address. *Talking LD* covers what to say about each subject and—when we know for certain—what not to say. Where we have data to back up our recommendations, the source is noted. Where there is no reference, we are making an informed, but not documented, recommendation about what to say.

Describing Learning Disabilities

It is difficult for people to understand these commonplace, but hidden, disabilities. This is made more difficult by misinformation and the deliberate distortions of those who claim that learning disabilities are an excuse for poor academic performance.

Our messages when describing learning disabilities should be:

- Learning disabilities are real. If they aren't addressed, they can seriously impede a person's success in school and life.
- Learning disabilities occur often. Most scientific experts agree that at least five percent—and likely more—of our school-age children have severe problems with learning.
- Learning disabilities are lifelong. Many children can be taught to compensate for them with early diagnosis and appropriate instruction (87% agree—Roper, 1999).
- People with learning disabilities are just as smart as you and I—their minds just process words and information differently (84% agree—Roper, 1999).
- Scientists have proven the biological basis of learning disabilities through the use of brain scans and other techniques. There also is proof that learning disabilities can be genetic.
- With appropriate intervention, people with learning disabilities can excel in school and life.
- All people have their own unique “learning fingerprint” or style. But when a person's unique way of learning prevents her or him from living up to society's expectations, it becomes a disability.

Diagnosis Or Identification

Fully four in 10 parents have worried at one time or another that their children might have a serious problem with learning or schoolwork. Twenty-seven percent of all parents say they are very worried that their child might not succeed in school (Roper, 1999). So how can advocates persuade these parents to investigate the possibility that a learning disability is undermining their child's chances of success?

One way is to educate the public about what warning signs to look for in children who are struggling in school. When discussing warning signs, select those that will produce the greatest agreement. The public believes that the following represent "some sign of serious problems" for a six-to-seven year-old:

- [Repeatedly] making errors with reading or spelling (48% agree—Roper, 1999)
- Having trouble counting and working with numbers (48% agree—Roper, 1999)
- Having trouble following simple directions (47% agree—Roper, 1999)

Many other signs are dismissed by people who believe a student exhibiting these symptoms "will grow out of it." These include:

- Having trouble learning to tell time (77% say will grow out of it—Roper, 1999)
- Gets distracted easily (62% say will grow out of it—Roper, 1999)
- Makes careless mistakes (81% say will grow out of it—Roper, 1999)

Therefore, it is important to mention warning signs from the first group, which are more likely to provoke a parental response rather than apathy.

Don't "Wait And See"

An alarming problem was identified by the latest focus groups and Roper survey both conducted in 1999. Research with parents revealed that four in 10 parents have considered that their child might have a serious problem with learning or schoolwork. But an alarming 44 percent of these parents waited for their child to exhibit signs of difficulty for a year or more before acknowledging their child may have a problem. This "wait and see" attitude is extremely harmful for children with learning problems. While it is never too late to get help, the greatest successes occur when students receive help in the early grades. Intensive assistance in later years can help older students and adults make significant progress.

Our messages about early intervention should be:

- If your child is struggling in school, he or she could have a learning disability.
- If your child is in preschool and is having trouble learning new words, following directions or has poor social skills, he or she could be showing early signs of a learning disability.
- Through early intervention, most children with learning disabilities can learn to compensate for them and become successful students.
- Identifying a learning disability at an early age is very important in helping a child succeed (91% agree—Opinion Research Corporation, June 1998).
- It is never too late to address a learning disability. Get help as soon as it is discovered and don't give up in the pursuit of help.
- Don't wait. Talk to your child's teacher and don't be afraid to seek an assessment if you are still in doubt.

Frequency of Occurrence

There is much debate about how to describe the prevalence of learning disabilities. CCLD suggests using the following messages to demonstrate that learning disabilities are not rare:

- Five to six percent of the US population has a learning disability—and likely more—according to the National Institutes of Health.
- You are not alone. Four in 10 parents report that their children have struggled in school at one time or another.
- If you suspect your child might have a learning disability get help as soon as possible.

Self-Esteem

Success in school breeds more success as praise and positive rewards encourage even more hard work. But for the student who struggles and often fails, the negative messages they receive can defeat their willingness to try at all. Poor self-esteem is the result. It is a killer of aspirations and often leads to risky and dangerous behaviors. These include increased substance abuse, unplanned pregnancies and even suicide. But if these threats are highlighted by advocates, will parents be more or less willing to have their children evaluated? Will more fear lead to more denial or to academic intervention? There is no clear answer. What we do know is that advocates should discuss learning disabilities in a way that does not create more barriers that interfere with parents getting their children the help they need.

Self-Esteem (continued)

The public seems to understand this dilemma. Two-thirds of parents claim they believe that children with learning disabilities are different but just as good as other children. And 63% feel that children with learning disabilities view themselves as different but not as good as other children (Roper, 1999).

Another issue is the “spill over effect” of learning disabilities on other family members. When one member of the family is hurting, everyone feels the pain. Self-esteem problems and the complexities of addressing a learning disability can undermine the balance of otherwise stable families. Advocates need to convey to parents of children with learning disabilities that they should be on the lookout for the impact a learning disability might have on everyone and to seek help from support groups or qualified therapists.

Our messages about self-esteem should be:

- Children whose learning disabilities are unaddressed can start to feel bad about themselves.
- If their special needs are not recognized and addressed, children with learning disabilities are more likely than most children to drop out of school (86% agree—Roper, 1995).
- Early identification and intervention is the way to begin solving this problem and can produce success in school for struggling students.
- Academic success is the most effective route to improving self-esteem in school and life.
- If you want your child to start feeling better, get help now. The longer you wait, the greater the risks.

Substance Abuse

Children with learning disabilities far too often fail in school and—because they are misunderstood—suffer from rejection from peers. Since isolation and school failure are common risk factors associated with substance abuse, parents and teachers need to be watchful for any warning signs of drug and/or alcohol use. In addition, a person with a learning disability is twice as likely as a member of the general population to suffer from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), which is an attention disorder, not a learning disability. People with ADHD have a high incidence of substance abuse—it's estimated that as many as half use drugs and/or alcohol.

Our messages should be:

- Parents and teachers of students with learning disabilities need to be on the lookout for the signs and symptoms of substance abuse and seek help if they see problems.
- Society as a whole needs to address the core issues of poor self-esteem of students with learning disabilities, which is compounded by repeated or ongoing school failure when learning disabilities are left unaddressed. Addressing learning disabilities early can probably help prevent some students from turning to alcohol, tobacco or illegal drugs.
- Teachers and parents should explore ways to help students handle failure or frustration and offer explicit information about the risks of substance abuse.
- Substance abuse is in many cases a response to poor self-esteem, academic failure, loneliness and depression that can be prevented by early identification and successful intervention to help students become successful learners.

What Schools Should Do

Schools are essential sources of help for students with learning disabilities and their parents. It is important to encourage parents to share their concerns with their children's teachers and to seek out appropriate services that schools must provide under the law if the child is eligible and requires special education services. Most parents, according to our polls, are inclined to talk with teachers and their children's pediatricians.

But focus groups of doctors and teachers reveal that too few of these professionals have a working knowledge of learning issues. In addition, even special education teachers often feel unsupported, unprepared, overwhelmed, and powerless. Too often they are asked to teach in situations that make them ineffective.

Advocates need to encourage policymakers and the federal government to help schools be able to do more. Three-quarters of children with reading difficulties who are not identified and helped by the time they reach age nine will still have poor reading skills at the end of high school. Anywhere from 40 to 60 percent of students taking the G.E.D.—which means they did not complete high school—have learning disabilities. This is an unacceptable situation since children with learning disabilities are as smart or smarter than their peers. To prevent such failures, administrators need adequate resources to be able to provide professional development opportunities for teachers so they can learn how to help all students learn. Teachers must be given opportunities to acquire the skills they need to teach to the unique learning styles of their students, an idea which is strongly endorsed by the public.

Our messages to parents and school personnel are:

- Talk to your child's teacher or a school psychologist if your child is struggling in school. Maybe there is an unidentified learning disability.
- You can get started early by trying to identify children with learning disabilities when they are in preschool.
- Teachers should teach to children's unique learning styles (61% agree—Roper 1994).
- Teachers can nurture successful learners by helping students understand their learning disabilities and by becoming more adept at teaching to the unique learning styles of all their students.
- As a parent, you should encourage school administrators to give teachers extra training to help them meet the needs of all their students.
- Encourage lawmakers to better fund school districts in order to reduce class sizes to give students more attention from teachers.
- Teachers can meet the individual needs of children with different learning styles without shortchanging the rest of the class (63% agree—Roper, 1994).
- Students with learning disabilities need:
 - Well-trained teachers (89% support—Roper, 1999)
 - More individual attention from teachers (89% support—Roper, 1999)
 - More time to take tests (76% support—Roper, 1999)

Special Education

Of the almost six million students in special education, about 2.8 million are identified with learning disabilities—the majority are ages 6 to 13. Some children with learning disabilities require intensive instruction to ensure academic success and lifelong coping skills to enhance their abilities to lead productive and rewarding lives. Others need minimal support, often in the form of accommodations that are easily and readily incorporated into the general curriculum. Special education is not synonymous with “expensive education.” Often the ideal learning environment for children with learning disabilities is simply a well-trained teacher in a flexible school setting that is equipped with the proper materials, resources and support—none of which necessarily requires significant resources.

Our messages about special education should be:

- Both general educators and special educators must view early intervention as part of their mission and play a role together in efforts to design and apply curriculum.
- If their special needs aren't recognized and addressed, children with learning disabilities are more likely than most children to drop out of school (86% agree—Roper, 1994).
- We do not have to label students to implement preventative programs. The costs of delaying action, both in terms of a child's self-esteem and the need for specialized instruction, are far too great to wait.
- Teaching should be tailored to the unique learning styles of students. We must ensure that all students who need special help receive it in the least restrictive environment.
- Parents need to be vigilant to make sure their children are getting what they need in order to make academic progress.
- By not fully funding special education services, the federal government is short-changing society.

Over-Identification and Accommodation of “the Undeserving”

In recent years, a number of newspaper articles and even a segment on *60 Minutes* have presented stories about over-zealous, usually affluent parents who force their children's schools to classify their children as having a learning disability so they may obtain various accommodations. Children are presented as undeserving for a variety of reasons. Schools are shown to fear lawsuits and the parents are portrayed as selfish.

The seeming over-use of the “learning disabilities” label in some of the nation's most affluent school districts is portrayed as proof that the system has run amok. While as advocates, we know these so-called abuses are few and far between, it is important that we recognize that such rare stories of privilege and using one's status to take unfair advantage of the system might strike a negative chord with a public that has heard it all before. Instead of dismissing such charges, our strategy should be to shift attention to the plight of students who need help but are being refused.

Our messages should be:

- The issue isn't over-identification of people with learning disabilities, it's the under-identification of people who really need help.
- Instead of worrying about whether too many are seeking special services, we should focus on improving services for all students.
- Society needs to help all children who need it, not just those with parents who advocate for them.
- Improving the quality of education for all students is the quickest route to ensuring that special education services are used by students who most need help.

Moving Beyond the Reading Wars

For years there has been a raging debate over the best methods for teaching reading, pitting phonics-based approaches against proponents of the “whole language” movement. Whole language emphasizes learning to read by the exploration of literature and word recognition whereas phonics teaches students how to match sounds with combinations of letters so they can more easily de-code and pronounce words.

A decade of research shows us that there is no one best way to build literacy skills in children. A balanced approach to teaching reading combines a strong foundation in phonics with whole language methods. Only through more than one kind of instruction can students gain the ability to recognize and manipulate the sounds of letters and words and the proficiency to understand what they read. Since all children learn differently, only a balanced approach to teaching reading can give all children the skills they need to read well.

It is also relevant to point out that most learning disabilities involve problems learning to read. Most experts agree that increasing phonics-based techniques (but without abandoning the whole language approach) in the early grades can help reduce the number of students classified as having a learning disability.

Our messages should be:

- Teachers need to teach the way kids learn best.
- Many students with reading problems will benefit if phonics-based teaching methods are used in the early grades.
- As a parent you should become informed about the methods your school uses to teach reading and make sure that phonics-based approaches are part of the curriculum.
- School districts will be more successful if given the resources they need to be able to screen children in kindergarten and ensure their teachers know how to use proven techniques for overcoming reading problems.

Testing

The use of standardized tests for graduation or grade promotion has gained a great deal of attention in the last few years. Under pressure from business leaders and politicians, schools and state officials have adopted tougher academic standards. The tests, it is argued, are needed to ensure school accountability. While these tests remain popular increasingly more parents and students, and even some political leaders, are protesting what they see as the over-reliance on these evaluation tools.

Research shows that for the most part the public is unaware of the high stakes attached to passing such tests. While they generally like the idea that everyone should meet the same standards, they are opposed to the idea that "high-stakes tests" alone could determine a student's future. They favor the use of other criteria, such as grades and attendance, in addition to standardized test scores.

For students with learning disabilities, high-stakes tests can have many unfortunate consequences. They can prevent graduation and might actually encourage students who fear failure to drop out. Many students in special education are not even exposed to the general curriculum on which these tests are based.

There is also a temptation on the part of school administrators to exempt students with disabilities from such tests, which many advocates feel gives schools a license to provide a second-class education to such students. And finally, students with learning disabilities taking such tests must be offered the same accommodations and modifications they are entitled to under their individual education plans.

Testing (continued)

Our messages on testing should include:

- Let's test abilities rather than disabilities. Don't let one test determine a person's entire future. Students deserve to have their grades, attendance, class participation, portfolios and other work taken into consideration for graduation or promotion.
- As with all tests, students with learning disabilities should receive appropriate testing modifications to measure their comprehension of the information, not just their test-taking skills.
- Make sure the tests cover material students have been taught.
- All parents should learn more about the use and misuse of testing and let their feelings be known.

Minority Over-Representation in Special Education

The overrepresentation of minority students in special education programs has been a public concern for decades but little has changed during this time. Specifically, the disproportion occurs in the disability categories of specific learning disabilities (SLD), serious emotional disturbances (SED), and mild mental retardation (MMR). African American male children labeled "mentally retarded" and "emotionally disturbed" are dramatically over-represented in special education when compared to white students and other minorities. The clear possibility of "mislabeling" leads one to believe that many of these children are not receiving appropriate instruction.

Is this subtle or overt racism? Do teachers and administrators misinterpret cultural and linguistic differences as reason for referral to special education? To what extent does poor academic performance or behavior problems require placement in special education? Four out of five teachers in a nationwide poll said that they lack confidence in their ability to teach students with special needs (*Teacher Quality: A Report on the Preparation and Qualifications of Public School Teachers*, U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Recent studies also clearly refute the common

Minority Over-Representation in Special Education (continued)

myth that racial overrepresentation in special education can be explained by factors associated with poverty.

Early identification and appropriate instruction for *all students* with learning problems is the bottom line for learning disabilities advocates.

Our messages about minority over-representation in special education should be:

- Schools must ensure that opportunities for educational achievement offered to minority students equal those offered to majority students.
- Special education programs must be carefully examined to determine the implications for minority students and to eliminate racial disparity.
- Processes used to identify, assess, and place students in special education programs must be developed and implemented that successfully prevent inappropriate placement.
- Aggressive efforts should be taken to correct attitudes and behavior associated with the identification of minority children in special education where discrimination exists.
- Support must be provided to teachers and other school professionals to build the capacity to work with students of different cultures and languages.
- More and better studies must be conducted that address the limitations of past research on the overrepresentation of minorities in special education.
- Special education should not be used as a dumping ground for students who cannot benefit from these services.
- Special education services for *all students* with disabilities must be improved.

Discipline

Children with learning disabilities are at greater risk of school failure and often experience difficulty and frustration relating to their peers and school personnel. These children are more likely to perceive themselves as poor students and are less likely to be involved in extracurricular activities. Academic and social failures and frustrations can sometimes lead them to engage in negative and disruptive behavior. (*Substance Abuse and Learning Disabilities: Peas in a Pod or Apples and Oranges*, The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, September 2000).

While statistics show that school violence has actually declined in the last decade, schools across the country have adopted stiff discipline policies in the wake of isolated incidences of unprecedented school violence. But so-called “zero-tolerance” policies that require schools to expel students deemed to be a threat have led to many needless expulsions. A worry is that students with learning disabilities may be adversely affected by such policies.

Our messages about discipline should be:

- Schools have an obligation to prevent violence and create a safe learning environment for all students. Disciplinary systems should be effective, non-discriminatory and inclusive.
- Zero-tolerance discipline policies are not supported by research and do not result in improved school environments.
- All students, including students with learning disabilities, should be ensured access to continuing education services in an alternative placement following disciplinary actions.

Adults and Learning Disabilities

Too often the needs of adults with learning disabilities are overlooked. Anecdotal information from focus groups suggests that having a learning disability persists as a problem long after the school years. The accommodations made in school may need to extend to the workplace. And discrimination needs to be addressed when it occurs. People have lost their jobs or have been demoted when employers have been told about an employee's learning disability.

Sadly, because of misinformation about learning disabilities, one of the most obvious questions is often overlooked by employers: how is it that a person with a learning disability could overcome such odds and succeed? The answer is that many people with learning disabilities demonstrate superior coping skills that may be of great use in the workplace.

Our messages about adults and learning disabilities should be:

- People with learning disabilities are equally capable of performing their jobs as other employees (80% agree—Roper, 1994).
- People with learning disabilities are sometimes fired despite good performance on the job when their learning disability is disclosed (85% agree—Roper, 1994).
- People with learning disabilities may approach challenges on the job in unconventional ways—and this unique perspective can add creativity and value to the workplace.
- The more people know about learning disabilities the less discrimination there will be.
- Adults with learning disabilities should learn their rights under the law and use them to protect themselves if necessary.

Toxic Chemicals and Learning Disabilities

According to a study conducted by the National Academy of Sciences, neurotoxicants (chemicals that impede normal neurological development) in combination with genes may account for 25 percent of developmental problems in children. As children's neurological development is particularly vulnerable to toxic pollutants, hazardous chemicals should be "guilty until proven innocent," according to EPA Advisor and Yale University professor John Wargo.

As far back as 1985, the House of Representatives Committee on Science and Technology reported that there were 850 known neurotoxicants, such as lead or mercury, which may result in devastating neurological or psychological disorders. Some researchers believe that the rise in diagnosed learning disabilities is a direct result of increased exposure to such chemicals in everyday life.

While for many the "jury is still out," advocates for people with learning disabilities should encourage greater research into the possible connection between neurotoxicants and learning disabilities, with an eye toward preventing children from being exposed to these chemicals.

Our messages about toxic chemicals and learning disabilities should be:

- The increased number of children with learning disabilities may be linked to a rise in toxic pollution we experience in everyday life.
- There needs to be more research into potential connections between toxic pollution and children's learning problems in school.
- The government must step up research to determine how best to reduce the risk of pollution-caused learning disabilities in children.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT

CCLD & Partner Organizations

Coordinated Campaign for Learning Disabilities (CCLD)—a coalition of the leading national learning disability organizations dedicated to improving public awareness about the nature and importance of learning disabilities. In 1996, CCLD launched a nationwide public awareness campaign targeted to the parents of young children to educate them on learning disabilities. Resources for parents include a free informational booklet, a Web site with extensive information on learning disabilities, and a television public service campaign, co-sponsored by the Ad Council.

www.aboutld.org
888-GR8-MIND

Council for Learning Disabilities (CLD)—an international organization that promotes new research and effective ways to teach people with learning disabilities.

www.cldinternational.org
913-492-8755

Division for Learning Disabilities (DLD)—an international group of teachers, university professors and researchers who work to improve education for people with learning disabilities. DLD is part of The Council for Exceptional Children.

www.dldcec.org
888-232-7733 (toll free)

The International Dyslexia Association (IDA)—an international organization offering information and referral and other services for people with dyslexia and related difficulties in learning to read and write.

www.interdys.org
800-ABCD123 (toll free)
410-296-0232

Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDA)—a parent-driven national organization offering support groups and information to help families dealing with learning disabilities.

www.LDAAmerica.org
888-300-6710 (toll free)
412-341-1515

National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD)—a national organization that develops and delivers research-based programs for teachers and parents, shapes public policy and maintains an online database of learning disabilities resources.

www.LD.org
888-575-7373 (toll free)
212-545-7510

Schwab Learning, a program of the Charles and Helen Schwab Foundation—Schwab Learning is an online guide to the landscape of learning disabilities, developed by the Charles and Helen Schwab Foundation especially for parents of children who are newly identified with a learning disability.

www.schwablearning.org
650-655-2410

Other Useful Resources for Advocates

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA)—membership information comprised of speech pathologists and audiologists that provides information and referrals to the public on speech, language, communications, and hearing disorders.

www.ASHA.org
800-638-8255

Children and Adults with Attention Deficit Disorder (CHADD)—a national non-profit membership organization that provides information, sponsors conferences, and hosts meetings and support groups.

www.chadd.org
800-233-4050

Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)—a national information system designed to provide ready access to an extensive body of education-related literature. Established in 1966, ERIC is supported by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement and is administered by the National Library of Education (NLE). Within ERIC, advocates of people with learning disabilities may be particularly interested in visiting the ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education.

www.accesseric.org
703-264-9474
800-328-0272

Family & Advocates Partnership for Education (FAPE)—a national project that aims to inform and educate families and advocates about the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) of 1997 and promising practices.

www.FAPE.org
888-248-0822

HEATH Resource Center—a national clearinghouse on secondary education for individuals with learning disabilities. HEATH resource papers, monographs, guides, and directories focus on a broad range of disability-related topics.

www.heath-resource-center.org
800-544-3284 (both Voice/TTY)
202-939-9320 (both Voice/TTY)

LDonline.org—an award-winning Web site offering in-depth information, audio and video clips, expert advice and a monthly newsletter for parents and professionals and for children and adults with LD.

www.LDonline.org

National Association of School Psychologists (NASP)—an international not-for-profit membership association of school psychologists. Promotes children's rights, produces a newsletter and videos, and sponsors conferences.

www.nasponline.org
301-657-0270

The National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (NICHCY)—provides information on disabilities and disability-related issues for families, educators, and other professionals. Focus is children and youth ages birth to 22.

www.nichcy.org
800-695-0285

Parent Training and Information Centers Directory—parent centers in each state provide training and information to parents of infants, toddlers, school-aged children, and young adults with disabilities and the professionals who work with their families. This assistance helps parents participate more effectively with professionals in meeting the educational needs of children and youth with disabilities.

www.taalliance.org/PTIs.html

ZERO TO THREE: National Center for Infants, Toddlers & Families—promotes the healthy development of infants and toddlers by supporting and strengthening families, communities, and those who work on their behalf. Dedicated to advancing current knowledge, promoting beneficial policies and practices, communicating research and best practices to a wide variety of audiences, and providing training, technical assistance and leadership development.

www.ZEROTOTHREE.org
202-638-1144

National Public Opinion Polls

Learning Disabilities and The American Public: A Look At American's Awareness and Knowledge, Roper Starch, 1995, commissioned by the Emily Hall Tremain Foundation.

Download from <http://www.aboutld.org/pressroom.html>
Request a free copy by calling 202/326-8729.

Measuring Progress in Public & Parental Understanding of Learning Disabilities, Roper Starch, 1999, commissioned by the Emily Hall Tremain Foundation.

Download from <http://www.aboutld.org/pressroom.html>
Request a free copy by calling 202/326-8729.

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