LANGUAGE-BASED LEARNING DISABILITIES

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“For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little and there a little” (Isaiah 28:9-10, KJV).

For the past few months, I have written articles sharing specific teaching strategies to modify instruction for a student with the types of special needs that are most obvious, such as dyslexia or dysgraphia. This month, I am going to begin a new series of articles that will introduce you to equally critical—but less obvious—deficits: Language-Based Learning Disabilities (LBLD).

Because of the importance of this topic, this first article exclusively is written to educate you about LBLD. I am not going to provide instructional strategies this month, because I want you to become more aware of how these disabilities may be impacting your child's learning. I also want you to reflect on whether some of these characteristics describe your child. Perhaps you can take some time to follow up on the resource links. In future articles, I will recommend teaching strategies that are appropriate for students who struggle with these invisible challenges.

In recent years, as I’ve worked with homeschooling parents, I have seen a marked increase in requests for help for a hard-working child who seems unable to demonstrate age-appropriate academic skills. I am often asked, “Why isn’t my child making progress?” While the parents cannot point to anything “concrete,” they share many similar frustrations in teaching written language, reading and comprehension, penmanship, math, and organizational skills. As I review the child’s work and listen to parents, I frequently uncover language-based deficits that reveal the root of the child’s academic challenges.

RECOGNIZING LANGUAGE-BASED LEARNING DISABILITIES

According to the American Speech and Hearing Association, language-based learning disabilities (LBLD), in the broadest sense, interfere with a child’s age-appropriate performance in any or all areas of communication, spelling, reading, and writing. Speech and language pathologists work with children who struggle with varied facets of communication. Speech deficits may include poor articulation, stuttering, and poor recognition of phonemes, but I am not addressing speech or articulation issues—just language disabilities. They may occur in receptive language (what the child understands from what he can hear) or in expressive language (what he is able to communicate with others in speech or writing.) You can immediately sense that Language-Based Learning Disabilities could be impacting your child in almost any area of academic, social, or family life! This is true, but remember that not all academic struggles are caused by language deficits!

Language-based learning disabilities are known to arise from a wide variety of causal factors (e.g., prematurity, neurological injury, developmental delays, Down’s Syndrome, or other causes). Many language-based learning disabilities involve neurological deficits, central auditory processing deficits (CAPD), or processing speed delays. Professionals use several terms to describe these processing deficits, but no matter what name is assigned, these weaknesses create unique requirements for instruction if the child is to be successful.
Children with limited language skills struggle to make sense of a world that is based *primarily* on language-based information. Since children manifest so many individual differences, it is impossible to describe all the possible variations! Sadly, if parents are not able to recognize the *true* reason for the child’s difficulties, they attribute challenging behaviors and learning delays to low intelligence, laziness, or even rebellion.

I would like to share with you some of the most commonly reported concerns that I have heard from hundreds of clients. In a very young child, parents may have observed only occasional evidence of a problem. Depending on age, your child’s language-based issues are first identified because of consistent incorrect grammar/syntax or a failure to employ context to understand what is said. As parents note the uneven progression in skills, they tell themselves that the child merely “needs more time to mature.” Increased maturity, however, does not seem to change much.

As the child moves into his school years, however, it has become obvious “something still isn’t right,” but it is still hard to isolate one significant symptom or primary concern. Those cute little quirks or minor glitches in communication acquire more “ominous” significance. Instead of normal development in skills, strengths, and abilities, your child has more and more difficulty with academics or language comprehension and usage. The student may struggle to put ideas into words or may speak with incomplete sentences. He often feels misunderstood and tends to say, “Never mind!” when asked to repeat or explain himself. His frustration leads to temper tantrums, meltdowns, and even depression. These negative behaviors create further friction in relationships, generate anxiety, and often increasingly limit the child’s ability to communicate effectively.

Perhaps he merely takes longer than normal to respond when spoken to or takes a very long time to generate written responses. He seldom follows oral directions for schoolwork (and family responsibilities) or is unable to correctly remember what to do in the right order. By midway through elementary school, written expression and composition have become a frequent battleground. Math operations with multiple steps become increasingly impossible, since it is necessary to recall all the steps in the right order. Word problems become more problematic.

You need to know that even reading problems may be a consequence of undiagnosed deficits in language-related skills. For example, you might notice that your child can read a paragraph, yet he cannot answer simple fact-based questions, or he may be unable to summarize the passage. When asked to answer questions orally or on a worksheet, he seems incapable of retrieving a specific vocabulary word. On tests, he cannot recall information mastered only hours (or minutes) ago. Despite repeated drill and study, the child repeatedly “forgets!”

**LANGUAGE ISSUES FOR CHILDREN ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM**

Children on the autism spectrum not only have deficits in interpreting social cues and non-verbal language, they also display deficits in language usage and comprehension. Some autistic children may be gifted and/or highly verbal, although some children with profound autism do not speak at all. Students on the spectrum (including Asperger’s syndrome) struggle to move beyond the *literal* meaning of language and thought. These children excel at rote learning, yet they are limited in their ability to move beyond learning concrete, factual information. This means typical comprehension questions and related activities are too difficult for them, because it’s too hard to draw an inference or to form conclusions from textbooks. Grammar is simply too abstract. In
addition, higher-order thinking proves elusive, despite evidence the student possesses strong oral language and/or vocabulary skills.

ALL CHILDREN CAN LEARN

I want to emphasize that even if your child has language-based learning difficulties (LBLD), remember that *every* child is able to learn. Language-Based Learning Disabilities are *not* a function of a child’s overall intelligence. Language skills are only *one* facet of overall intelligence and ability, and weak vocabulary or an inability to recall information only impacts *some* subtest scores on an IQ test.

TEACHING

Children with language-based learning disabilities *can* be taught successfully and *can* show what they know *when* you present the tasks in a different way or use a modified presentation and adapted assessments.

If your child’s language skills are weak, it is vital that you present as many alternative options as possible for the child to excel. Parents typically instruct children in the same way they themselves were taught. Unfortunately, that “tried and true” approach is not the best fit for children with language-based learning disabilities. Traditional books, workbooks, texts, and written assignments are not the optimal path for these children to acquire new knowledge and to display what they have learned.

It is critical that you recognize the characteristics of language-based learning disabilities. Then you can decide which academic tasks are appropriate and how to modify and adapt. Language-based learning disabilities are complex, multi-faceted, and influence most academic subjects! Once you begin to recognize what is at the root of your child’s struggles, you will find liberty and greater peace! You will recognize the truth, and that truth will set you free! Starting next month, I am going to introduce proven strategies that will support and equip your child’s learning.

RESOURCES

Websites

**www.speech-language-therapy.com**

Informational site re: speech and articulation deficit resources.

**http://www.ldontheweb.org/home.html**

Hub for information on non-verbal learning disabilities.

**http://www.asha.org/public/**

American Speech and Hearing Association. Information, links and resource collections.

**http://www.nidcd.nih.gov/directory/area.asp?areatype=languagetopic**

National Institute on Deafness and other Communication Disorders: A hub for specific topics and organizational links.
http://www.ldonline.org/article/6336/
Learning Disabilities online site with links for information.

http://childdevelopmentinfo.com/child-psychology/children_with_communication_disorders.shtml
A look at speech/language from a developmental perspective.

Books

*When the Brain Can't Hear.* Terri J. Bellis. Available from Amazon in print or on Kindle. Wonderful resource to understand the child who is able to hear yet can’t understand or use language in an age-appropriate way. Highly readable and solidly researched.

*Auditory Processing Therapy Ideas* by Patti Hamaguchi, M.A., CCC-SLP. This is an Adobe Acrobat file. You can find it simply by typing the title in a Google Search Engine. It is a 40 page article that is loaded with specific ideas to help you understand language-based learning problems and what to do.

*Childhood Speech, Learning and Language Problems: What Every Parent Should Know.* Patricia Hamaguchi. Book available from Amazon.com (Even used copies for $.01!!!) or on Kindle for $9.99.

Software

*First Phrases app by Hamaguchi: Apps for Speech, Language and Auditory Development.* Simple, easy to use, step by step software app for children to use the computer to play and strengthen language skills.