

## The Many "Faces" Of Learning Problems

### "What's *Really* Going on When Kids with Average (or Above) IQs Struggle in School and Drive Their Teachers and Parents Crazy?"

Chatting with friends and making jokes gets Mark through his day at school. Of course, his teacher is extremely irritated with him for constantly disrupting the class with his talking and his jokes. And she cannot understand how such a smart boy can refuse to do his work and get very little accomplished during the day.

The truth about Mark is that he *is* very intelligent, but he can't read very well. His intelligence gets him by; he can read enough to sometimes get answers right, to sometimes get parts of assignments done. Unfortunately, he can get just enough done to make it look like he can do it, so when he doesn't, he looks unmotivated.

**Mark's teacher thinks he has Attention Deficit Disorder.  
In reality, he is dyslexic.**

He *can't* do the work so he finds other ways to entertain himself. He's getting Fs in 4th grade. Mark's mother sees how hard he tries at home, but even she is frustrated because Mark can't seem to get any of his homework done without her there helping every minute.

Dad is mad because he thinks Mark could do better if he tried harder. And Mark just wants to give up. No matter how hard he tries, he still can't manage to make the grade.

**Sports is the name of the game for Josh** . He's good at them all and brags about going to college on a sports scholarship of some kind. Secretly, though, Josh is pretty worried. He can't seem to make the grades in school and the football coach is talking like he might not be able to continuing playing.

Josh puts on an attitude of not caring, but deep down he's humiliated and embarrassed. How can he be so good at every sport he tries and be so lousy at school?

**His dad thinks he's just lazy.** " Maybe, that's it," Josh thinks. I mean why else would it take him so much longer to read the darned history assignment and then still not have a clue what it's about. Math is OK, but he always seems to forget to do some of the problems, and English, forget it! How's he supposed to read a whole chapter and write an essay on it every night? He can't think of a thing to say when he gets ready to write. **Maybe he's just stupid.** Maybe he should forget about college. His parents are going to ground him anyway if he gets one more F.

Josh is one of those kids who can read, write, and do math, but just can't seem to "pull it all together" to get his work done with any consistency.

**Math makes Amanda want to cry.** In fact, most nights, she does end up in tears when her dad is trying to help her get through her homework. It just doesn't make sense.

And it takes forever.

She feels like she's trying really hard, but those numbers and signs on the page just don't make sense. She manages to get her homework done with her dad's help, but when test time comes around, it's all over. She's gotten in the habit of hiding her tests so her parents don't know she's gotten another failing grade.

Amanda hates math and she's beginning to hate school as well. All she really wants is to have friends, but somehow that doesn't seem to work out very well either. Whenever she makes a new friend, they end up in some kind of a misunderstanding. Amanda doesn't even know what happened, but her new girlfriend quit hanging out with her. Somehow, whether its math class or talking to other kids in the hall, Amanda finds herself confused or saying the wrong thing. Even when she tries her best, people make fun of her and her teachers and parents think she's not trying.

**Amanda's real problem is her auditory processing.**

Her poor listening skills make math hard because ***she misses some of the important information the teacher is explaining.*** She can get by in other classes because she can fill-in the gaps by re-reading the chapter, but she's completely lost in math. Too much has been missed along the way.

Amanda misses information in conversation as well, so she says the wrong thing or misinterprets what other people say. She's always getting her feeling hurt and getting defensive so other kids don't really want to hang out with her.

**Regular kids, with average to above average intelligence are sitting in class, day after day, frustrated and misunderstood by their teachers, parents, classmates, and even themselves .**

They **want** to do well in school. They know they should be able to. But somehow, they just can't seem to do it.

- Why does it take them so long to finish their work?
- Why do they have hours more homework than other kids in their class?
- Are they just stupid? Must be, since everyone else seems to be able to do the work more easily.

***Surprisingly, these kids exist in every classroom in every school .*** They might be good at hiding it, but they are suffering nevertheless. Somehow, no matter how good they are at other things, reading or math, or some other aspect of school just isn't working out for them as well as it should.

## The 4 Groups of Learning Skills

Easy learning is built upon a continuum of neurodevelopmental learning skills that start with reflexes in utero and continue developing to the highest levels of thinking. We think of that continuum in four basic levels:

- **Developmental or Core Learning Skills** - Learning, or information processing, is actually stimulated by movement. It begins in utero with movements triggered by reflexes. When babies are born, these reflexes begin to go away, or become integrated, as higher levels of thinking begin to take over. Integration happens through trial and error movements and gradually intentional movement. Physical movement and exploration is **critical** to developing visual skills and becoming internally organized.

People often think of organization in terms of planning and organizing time, projects and materials, but internal organization is needed in order to sit in a chair or walk across a room without bumping into things.

- **Processing Skills** - Processing skills is the second level in the learning skills continuum. These include such skills as memory, attention, visual processing (how we think about information that we can see or imagine), auditory processing (how we think about information that we hear, such as the sounds in words or the tone of voice our friend is using), language processing, and processing speed (how quickly we can think about and respond to information).

Challenges in **any** of these areas will cause the learner to have to work longer and harder than they should.

- **Executive Function Skills** - Executive function is like the brain's CEO. This is the part of the brain that guides our behavior and attention, that helps us plan and reason and solve problems. Students are notorious for putting long term projects off to the last minute. But the bottom line is it takes a number of sophisticated executive function skills to plan out and execute a project.

If a student looks lazy, unmotivated, or disorganized, the real culprit may weak executive function skills.

- **Academic Skills or higher learning s kills** - The highest level on the continuum is academic and higher learning skills. Success in this arena depends upon a solid base of skills in the levels below. People of all ages learn how to compensate for their challenges, but compensating is hard and inefficient. The supporting skills **must** be in place in order to learn new information easily.

**Learning problems are very broad.** They look different on different kids, but the thing they have in common is this:

**Something is breaking down in their processing of information.**

Learning is all about processing incoming information - whether it's a toddler picking up a cracker and finding out that it breaks in his hand or a 12th grader doing calculus.

**When students that you know are struggling in school, when you are tempted to write it off as lazy, or attention, or immaturity, take a closer look. There are dozens of skills that may not all be working together to make learning easy.**

**The Good News : All those skills can be taught, built, corrected. There is REAL hope for all those kids.**