



LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

School lessons are a challenge for many kids, but when do you let them work it out for themselves and when do you seek help?

Super-brain Albert Einstein didn't speak until he was three years old, folklore claims. Inventor Thomas Edison was apparently thrown out of school, aged 12, for being dim-witted and entrepreneur Richard Branson has discussed his struggles with dyslexia.

For at least one in five children, learning in the mainstream educational system will not come easily. Some paediatric experts believe that number could even be closer to one in three. Not all of these kids will be labelled with a disorder or condition such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or dyslexia. Some will simply have learning difficulties.

Finding out your child has a problem with learning can be confusing and painful for parents. What do they do about it? Is it their fault? Who of the many paediatric

specialists do they turn to for help?

Defining difficulties

Warren Johnson, CEO of Learning Links, a Sydney charity formed to help the families of children who have learning disabilities, difficulties and developmental delays, has this broad-based description of learning difficulties.

"Children struggle to learn for many reasons. Some children have difficulty paying attention, reasoning, remembering things, communicating, reading, spelling or socialising, while others have coordination and behavioural problems," he says.

"[They] are a group of disorders leading to significant difficulties in listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning or mathematical abilities, which are inconsistent with a child's ability. They are not related to intelligence, parenting styles or

educational opportunities."

The Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDAA) is also bluntly reassuring to parents about what causes learning difficulties. "[Difficulties] emanate from a neuro-physiological base," the LDAA says. "It is as though the switchboard of the brain short-circuits some of the information coming in, scrambles it, and then loose wires interfere with the ability to get that information out.

"Parents can be reassured that these problems are organic and are not caused by external factors."

Know the warning signs

Indicators that a young child may have some learning difficulties can be subtle and hard for parents to spot. Learning Links has this list for children under school age, and advises that if a child demonstrates



- two or more of these that parents see a health professional:
- + Limited play skills.
 - + Difficulty using utensils.
 - + Not imitating others' actions.
 - + Not interested in interacting with familiar people.
 - + Not exploring their environment.
 - + Non-responsiveness to loud noises and voices.
 - + Lack of visual interest in faces, lights or noise.
 - + Noticeably floppy or rigid.

- For school-age children:
- + Tries very hard yet doesn't achieve at school.
 - + Is bright, yet has difficulty with reading, writing, spelling or maths.
 - + Has trouble concentrating and/or

- following instructions.
- + Is poorly organised or clumsy.
 - + Reverses letters and numerals, gets confused about days of the week, and/or a sequence of events or sounds in words.
 - + Is the class clown, has difficulty following school rules or withdraws while in the classroom.

Where to turn

Parents can play a pivotal role in helping their children deal with their difficulties. Johnson says many children can go on to "grow out of" learning difficulties: "A lot of research suggests early intervention is likely to have a lasting impact. If a parent has concerns, trust your instincts and start seeking advice." There are a raft of experts

claiming they can help children with learning difficulties, including speech and occupational therapists, behavioural optometrists, child psychologists and naturopaths. So where does a parent start? Johnson suggests that if a child is of school age, they start with their teacher. If younger, see your GP. Learning Links also has advice at www.learninglinks.org.au

bodyandsoul.com.au



+ Read **Fiona Baker's** latest article on children's speech difficulties at bodyandsoul.com.au

Learning curve

Brain development does not occur in a straight line for kids. Some kids may develop some skills earlier than other skills or other kids. While a child can be advanced in reading or speech in kindergarten, they can show average ability by year 3 or 4.

American Psychological Association

