

### Talking with Family about Your Child's Learning Disability: Challenges and Rewards

"I'm having a hard enough time coping with Jason's learning disability myself, so why do I have to talk to my family about it, too? They think I'm just being overprotective. I really don't think they'll understand. Couldn't it make things worse at home for Jason?"

#### Why Talk to Family Members?

Coping with a child's learning disability (LD) is stressful for any parent, and the last thing you need is another demand on your time and energy. But avoiding talk about your child's LD can send a message to well-meaning family members that you're hiding something — feeling ashamed, embarrassed, or guilty.

How will family members take the news? Some will accept the problem and offer support right away. Telling the "secret" often produces great relief for everyone involved. And since learning disabilities are often inherited, it may even help other family members understand the reasons they may have had problems when they were in school. Others may disagree or deny there's a problem at all. And some may even blame you or your child. How you approach family members depends both on their current understanding of learning disabilities, and on their willingness to accept that your child has LD. Regardless of the approach you take to informing family members, there are many reasons why educating your family about LD can help your child and you personally:

- To break down barriers that separate families because of misinformation or misunderstanding.
- To provide a common knowledge of how your child learns — his strengths, as well as challenges — and why he acts as he does.
- To exchange harmful labels (eg., dumb, lazy, inattentive) for terms that describe his talents and help to build self-esteem (eg., creative thinker, star athlete, skilled at math).
- To help set realistic expectations for your child.
- To reduce feelings of isolation for you and your child.
- To expand the home support system for you and your child.

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## **Find Your Allies**

Begin by talking to those in your family who understand and accept the situation. Together, you can decide how to work with resistant relatives. You and your child can depend on these "allies" to support you and reinforce the message with other family members.

Keep information simple and avoid using educational jargon. Help family members identify some strategies to help your child succeed in his interactions with them. Remember how overwhelming even basic information was when you first began learning about learning disabilities? Give everyone a chance to think about what you've shared. It won't be easy if the person is in denial — doesn't believe or accept what you're saying. Then you'll need lots of patience and an outside support system to get you through the process.

For most of the family, education isn't something that can be done effectively in one talk. As questions arise, take advantage of the opportunity to answer thoughtfully. Some people may want to learn more on their own, so be ready to provide resources for them — articles, educational programs, and support groups.

Remember to include your child in discussions so he has a chance to tell his own story, in his own way. It's probably better if you do this after you know how others will respond to him. Are they likely to doubt what he's telling them, or will they understand and be able to offer him support? Remember to have him talk about his strengths and talents, as well as his LD.

## **Talk with Siblings**

Talking to the brother or sister of your child with LD may be the hardest job of all. Siblings often feel jealous of all the extra attention a child with LD needs — extra help on homework, tutoring, time spent at school — and may be quick to express anger or make comments that can hurt. Parents have to balance the demands of all their children, not just those with special needs.

When speaking to a sibling, consider the age of the child, use language that's easy to understand, and speak positively and factually. Reassure all your children that each one is special and loved and find ways to show them you mean what you say. The structure and positive discipline that help kids with LD function better can benefit all kids in the family. So have routines apply to everyone, and that way no one will feel singled out or left out!

## **Dealing with Denial**

You may feel sure a certain family member loves your child. So why can't she understand his special needs? You may gain insight if you ask yourself some questions about the person who's in denial.

- Is she afraid for your child? Does she find it too upsetting to think about the problem and how it might affect your child's chances for success?

- Does she feel guilty because she wasn't sympathetic enough to your child's struggles in the past?
- How was she brought up as a child? How were individual differences recognized and addressed in her family?
- Did she have trouble learning as a child, too? Since LD often runs in families, will she now have to face her own problem?
- Did you overwhelm her with too much information? Some family members don't need to understand every detail in order to help.

If your spouse or partner denies the problem, it can put distance between your child and him. Your child may feel rejected if a parent accuses him of being "lazy" or "stupid." Or your spouse may blame the problem on your family or your parenting skills. Either of these reactions can have a harmful effect on your child and your marriage.

If your spouse can't accept what you're telling him, perhaps another family member or a trusted teacher could help him understand. If communication about your child's problem doesn't improve, consider professional marriage and/or family counselling right away.

Once your spouse seems receptive, help him learn what LD is and what it is not. When he seems ready, help him discover ways to get involved.

As you reflect on possible reasons for each family member's reaction, you'll think of better ways to approach each of them. For instance, if your mother sometimes cares for your child after school, she may want to know some basic tips for helping him with his homework. But explaining your child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) may overwhelm her.

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### **Highlighting Your Child's Strengths**

Would it be easier for certain family members to focus on what your child does well, rather than what he struggles with? If so, praise them for wanting to boost your child's self-esteem. Then ask how each person would like to support your child's skills, talents, and interests. For example:

- Does your child share a love of science with his dad? They might go to a science museum or build a project for the science fair together.
- Reassure aunts, uncles, and grandparents that showing interest in your child's hobbies and activities is a great gift. Simple gestures, such as showing

interest in the child's opinions or sharing secret jokes, will help him feel special.

- Encourage your other children to cheer their brother on at games and remind him what he's good at. Some siblings resent this responsibility, so rewarding their efforts is very important.

### **Aiming for Acceptance**

While it's important to educate family members about your child's LD as soon as you comfortably can, do it on your own timetable — when it feels right for you.

Communicating with your family about LD is an ongoing process. It will take time for each family member to feel comfortable in a new role with your child. Don't be discouraged if some never fully understand his LD. As long as they give him their love, acceptance, and attention, he'll feel special. In time, each person can find positive ways to support and interact with him.

### **About the Contributor(s)**

**Ann Christen** is a licensed marriage, family, and child counselor with extensive clinical experience working with children and families affected by learning difficulties, focusing particularly in familial issues. She is the mother of three grown daughters, two of whom have LD and the third who is severely disabled.

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