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Brief Information for Parents

The terms Delay, Difficulty and Disability are frequently interchanged by various people when discussing learning problems and learning weaknesses in general. In some contexts such as open and casual discussion that is not meant to be diagnostic or prognostic in nature, this may be appropriate. But too often these terms appear in formal reports and other types of formal communication with scant regard to their discrete meaning. This is a short note to help present the modern and acceptable use of these terms.

Delay

The term *delay* implies that the child's learning problems will correct given suitable time. It likely Thus, there is probably not much to be gained by structured attempts at remediation or accommodation. In other words the problem can be left untreated and given a reasonable period of time the child will recover naturally.

Difficulty

The term *difficulty* is used to describe a learning problem that may present similarly to a delay but will not improve or only improve marginally over time. It usually means that the child has a problem in specific and identifiable curriculum areas and with specific and identifiable scholastic skills. It implies that given structured support in the areas of concern the problem will correct.

Disability

The term *disability* is used to define a neurological and constitutional based disorder. Learning disabilities have a neurological signature and represent a lifelong condition. This means that the child will have significant and long term academic and scholastic problems. Dyslexia and its various subtypes and Non Verbal Learning Disorder are examples of such disabilities. This type of problem has nothing to do with intellect, environment, social status, educational opportunity, self-esteem or motivation. It can only be managed and improved with highly structured, thoughtful and goal driven interventions that usually contain some elements of perceptual and processing training as well as multisensory literacy instruction.

Difference

This term, though in its infancy in terms of professional use, is being widely used by parents, support groups and learning advocates in an attempt to de-stigmatise Dyslexia and other learning 'problems'. By using the word 'difference' it highlights the fact that

though certain children find text based learning more difficult they find other activities and skills easy to learn and in fact may have above average abilities in other areas.

Some are concerned that the term “learning disability” focuses on an individual’s weaknesses and isolates them from other learners while the term “learning differences” highlights the fact that they simply learn differently than others do.

What exactly is the difference between ‘Learning Disability’ and ‘Learning Differences’ and why does it matter what terminology is used?

Individuals with learning disabilities do learn differently and have as much to offer and contribute as individuals without learning disabilities. However, presently the term ‘Differences’ has no formal or legal status and whilst the term Learning Disability is still not well understood it does at least attract legislative based support under certain disability laws and policies of Education Queensland. Unfortunately, there is no such legislation connected with the use of the term ‘Differences’.

Literacy Care understands and supports the use of the term ‘Differences’ in a general way but officially endorses the use of the term ‘learning disabilities’ to ensure that individuals are appropriately identified and correctly managed. It is important to call a house fire a ‘house fire’ if you want house fire help.

The hope is that as time progresses Queensland and Australia will develop the sophisticated legislation that is needed to identify and effectively manage children who learn differently so as they have the same opportunities as their peers to develop and grow and have equal access to employment and all of life’s opportunities.