

10 Things I Wish I'd Known About Learning Disabilities

Jane Ross, founder and Executive Director of *Smart Kids with Learning Disabilities*, shares the lessons that she learned the hard way.

1. Trust yourself. Although his teachers said my son was fine, I knew in my heart that something was wrong: He skipped words while reading, spelled words differently each time he wrote them, and couldn't subtract to save his soul.

2. Trust your child. I knew my child was smart. But like many children with learning disabilities, he has strengths that aren't necessarily valued in the classroom — visual, spatial and musical abilities, good interpersonal skills, and a terrific sense of humor — while struggling with the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic.

3. Get your child tested. Even if school administrators discourage you ("He'll be out of the classroom for hours; you can't change your mind; you don't want him to be stigmatized!"), testing is critical if you suspect something is wrong. Neither you nor the school can help your child if you don't know what the problem is.

4. Stay calm. Don't be flummoxed by the roller-coaster-like ups and downs of your child's standardized test scores. The highs and lows reflect the uneven profile of his strengths and weaknesses; take note particularly of his strengths!

5. Become an expert. At the end of the assessment process, the professionals must provide a full explanation of what is wrong — one that makes sense to you. An accurate diagnosis helps you arm yourself with information about your child's learning issues; your knowledge is key to getting the right help.

6. Prepare for action. Once you know what he needs in order to succeed in school, gear up to ensure he gets it. You are your child's best and most effective advocate: How well he does depends, ultimately, on you.

7. Nurture his interests. Music — something my child loved — was a life preserver! The best predictor of a child's success is not grades or aptitude scores; it's the energy and commitment he gives to activities he cares about. Help him pursue his passions, whether building with Legos®, cooking, sports, music, art, dance, or collecting bugs.

8. Give them credit. Kids with learning disabilities are neither lazy nor unmotivated: They can't do better simply by trying harder. They need specific help or interventions — accommodations and some changes in the usual classroom routines — to succeed.

9. Get real. One misconception it's time to lay to rest is that reading and doing well in school equate with intelligence. Children with learning disabilities may struggle in school, but are no less intelligent than other children: They are simply wired



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differently.

10. Buoy them with praise. Kids with learning disabilities are generally creative and resourceful. Many innovative thinkers — scientists, inventors, performers and entrepreneurs — have learning disabilities. With your love and support and their own hard work, there is nothing these kids cannot achieve.

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