

# Fact Sheet

Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC)  
250 City Centre, # 616, OTTAWA, ON K1R 6K7  
1-877-238-5322 • FAX : (613) 235-5391



## Effective Teacher-Parent Partnerships

All too often, parents and teachers find themselves embroiled in disagreements about how best to help children with special learning needs. Children are always winners when teachers and parents work together effectively. This partnership will insure that problems can be addressed quickly and that the needs of parents, school personnel, and students are reflected in any decision-making process.

A wonderful first step in building this relationship is the parent-teacher conference. Such a meeting, held at the beginning of the school semester, can enable parents and teachers to overview hopes and expectations for the academic year and to overcome potential barriers to communication.

Equally important is to create a plan for regular and ongoing contact that will insure that concerns are addressed before they turn into problems.

1. The key to any successful partnership is to establish a relationship of mutual respect and appreciation. An occasional note, informal meeting, or conversation can go a long way toward fostering a productive relationship.
2. By agreeing upon a system for regular and ongoing communication, parents and teachers can best monitor progress and address unexpected needs in a timely manner. Parents and teachers should agree upon a "best time" to meet or speak, or choose to communicate in writing.
3. Parents are well advised to learn about the system within which teachers must do their job and that sometimes compromises their ability to pay closer attention to students with special needs. Parents are encouraged to ask how they can help teachers to overcome obstacles and to promote positive change.
4. Teachers can help parents become active partners in supporting learning by sharing information about class routines. Notifying parents about grading criteria, homework and test schedules, projects, and class trips is very useful, as is establishing guidelines for ways in which parents can help with checking work and studying.
5. Parents should inform teachers about possible factors at home that either pose obstacles to learning or that might enhance the teacher's effectiveness in the classroom. Family stressors and a student's participation in extra-curricular activities might impact upon school performance.
6. Teachers should inform parents about rules and regulations for the classroom as well as the school community. Parents might be asked to provide feedback

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regarding behavioral expectations and discipline guidelines at the onset of the school year.

7. Parents may not always be able to assess the workings of the classroom from homework assignments and test grades. Teachers should provide parents with an overview of content area instruction and teaching style. Parents should seek information about classroom routines.
8. Parents are "experts" when it comes to their own children. By providing information to teachers about past positive (and negative) school experiences, teachers can take advantage of what is already known to be good practice with these children. Parents should highlight activities that have been successful in increasing motivation and improving performance. Mention situations that have caused frustration and resulted in underachievement or inappropriate behavior.
9. Just as students are unique learners, parents and teachers have unique characteristics and styles of working with children.
10. Teachers and parents should remind each other that one way to promote success in school is to insure that students feel "special" about their learning. Children should be praised for even small successes. Efforts should be made to afford children opportunities to be increasingly self-sufficient and to maintain high expectations for school success.

Please contact your provincial/territorial Learning Disabilities Association (LDAs) to find the closest chapter to your community at <http://www.ldac-taac.ca/chapters/chapters-e.asp>

All LDAs and local chapters have extensive libraries on learning disabilities, and can advise you on how to successfully partner with your local school district's special education officials.

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## Classroom Strategies for the LD Child

As an educator, you may find that 10% of the students in your class have various types of learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, dyscalcula, auditory or visual processing difficulties or dysgraphia. You may notice that these students do not participate or they may withdraw or even act out in class, because they do not know how to read, spell or express themselves in oral or written language or have visual spatial difficulties. Many regular teaching techniques often do not work for them.

### **Attention**

- To maintain better focus or attention, arrange special seating for the student. The student can sit in the front of the class, or they can sit in an end row, where other students are only on one side of them.
- Allow the student to have a tactile toy such as a soft or textured hand ball that a student can fiddle with. Make sure the toy doesn't make too much noise.
- When doing an activity or an assignment, emphasize the intent of the activity, such as "accuracy is more important than speed". Assign work only one task at a time rather than every thing at once.

### **Auditory processing**

- Make sure that you give verbal instructions away from background noises. Simplify your language and vocabulary. Have the students look and repeat back your instructions.
- Break your lesson or instruction into small parts, these are easier to remember. Give students time to complete the steps before going on to the next part.
- When possible, give concrete and specific examples. If introducing new concepts, such as in math, science, art ideas, etc., provide pictorial information to make a connection with what is heard.
- Allow sufficient time for instructions or questions to be processed. The student needs time to hear the question, make sense of it, think of an answer and formulate a response.

### **Coordination**

- Teach the student specific handwriting strategies that encourage them to print or write letters in a consistent manner. Use thin or thick markers, pencil and pens with rubber grips to improve or pencils with darker graphite, dark colour pens or markers if applying pressure is a challenge.
- Use the hand-over-hand technique to help the student get use to the feel of the movement. Talk aloud, describing each step clearly. Ask how it is working.
- Make sure that the student's body is positioned properly when working at a desk. Ensure that the feet are on the floor, the desk is at an appropriate level, that forearms are supported by the desk, etc.

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## **Math**

- Provide a verbal and written pattern for solving math problems. Model the pattern for students by saying out loud, both your thinking process and what steps you are doing, as you write them on the chalkboard. This way the student can see and hear the instructions.
- Solving word problems requires the student to have skills in specific math vocabulary as well as a certain level of reading, comprehension and listening skills. If the student is experiencing difficulties in language skills, you may need to adapt the math problem to reflect the students reading level.
- If the student doesn't understand math facts like multiplication tables, find a different way to approach the math skill. For example if memorizing multiplication tables is difficult, explain that  $7 \times 2 = 14$ , so if 14 is doubled, then  $7 \times 4 = 28$ .

## **Organization**

- Word your instruction so that the student doesn't waste time trying to understand them. Unclear instructions can result in frustration in trying to complete the work. Provide written instruction as well with time limits such as "You have 15 minutes to complete this task". The written instructions act as a reminder for students with memory problems.
- Break longer assignments into "sprint work" for the student to complete quickly one after another. Your student will feel less overwhelmed and he/she will complete more tasks in less time.
- Tape a checklist to the student's desk. Place a copy into each subject folder or notebook. The checklist should outline steps, directions, different amounts of time (10, 15 or 20 minutes) for completed assignment. The student ticks off the box that applies to the task as they are completed.

## **Procrastination**

- Make weekly check-ins with the student to plan assignments and projects. Have the student schedule important activities with due date into a day timer, along with a concrete plan, classmates who can help, etc., to follow through on his/her intentions.
- Have the student take 15 minutes at the end of each day to put things away and look at the calendar or agenda book for the next day. A to-do list, can be taped on the inside door of a locker in order to gather what is needed before leaving school.
- Ask the student, "What stops you from getting started?" Teach the student to stop a minute to think about what's preventing him/her from doing the work. It could be something very simple like "I don't understand the instructions", or "I don't know where to start". In that case, you can reword the instructions and have the student repeat them back. With the former, you can help the student brake down the task so it doesn't look too big and overwhelming for them.

## **Reading**

- If the student has substituted a word in a sentence, then it deserves your attention. For example, **Text**: "The wagon was drawn by horses"; **Child**: "The wagon was drowned by horses". Ask the child, "Does that make sense?" If the child continues to makes mistakes, give him/her easier materials to read.
- Write four or five short sentences for the student to read. Include as one of the five sentences one that is completely out of context. Ask the student to identify the "the wrong sentence or part" of the story. Once the student can detect

- "nonsensical" sentences, give them one of his/her own problem sentence and ask "Do you recognize the wrong parts of the sentence?"
- If the student leaves out a word because he/she doesn't understand the concept, you need to teach the concept of that word. For example, if the word is "alligator", sound the phonemes out, say the word out loud, explain its meaning, show a picture, draw a picture, display a model, etc., of the word. Once the student has a vivid understanding of the word, it is least likely they will omit the word again.

### **Self Esteem**

- When assigning homework, tell the student to "Look at all ten questions, and to select six questions to answer that you think best demonstrates your knowledge" By offering a choice, the student takes control and ownership of their learning.
- Have the student contribute to the school environment. If a child excels in reading, pair him/her up with a student needing help. Have the student take care of plants or small animals in the classroom, or seasonally decorate the room with class drawings, projects, etc.
- Use cooperative learning so students gain experience working and helping one another. This offers an opportunity for students to realize they have something to contribute to others.

### **Social Skills**

- Focus on behaviour that can be modified such as talking out of turn. Carefully provide clues like "Raise your hand to talk", or encouragement like "That was right" or be more direct by standing next to the student so that his/her focus is on you and not on the unwelcome behaviour.
- Interpersonal skills are learned in small student groupings of three or four members on projects. Students learn cooperatively from one another, share organizational ideas, responsibilities, and tasks.
- Many times students are unaware that their facial expression or wandering eyes is out of place when having a conversation. Don't misinterpret unexpected responses as an attempt to mock you or defy you.

### **Spelling**

- It is often useful for a student to keep a word index or a personal dictionary of words the frequently misspell.
- Have the student break apart a word. Ask, "How is this word like other words you know?" Point out that words have patterns such as the **tion**; "institu-**tion**" and "tradi-**tion**". Look for prefixes, suffixes, and roots words such as "**un-cover-ing**" and "'**pre-vail-ing**".
- Leaving out letters from words can help a student become aware of correct spelling as well as reinforcing the visual elements of the words. For example, have the student fill in the blanks to the word, **efficient**: **e\_\_icient**  
**eff\_cient**    **effic\_\_nt**
- Watch for the way the student is pronouncing the word. This can help avoid common spelling errors, such as **li-bary** instead of **library**, **prob-lee** instead of probably, or ath-a-leet instead of athlete.

### **Time**

- The student will function better when able to anticipate times required to complete a task. Provide a visual representation of the day's schedule. Use visual cues to indicate time to change tasks or activities.
- Write the schedule and timelines on the black board each day. Include due dates for each assignment.

- At the beginning of each week, let the student know the activities being covered. Have the student make a plan that helps them get through the day and week without running around crazy. The plan should include the task, what needs to be done, materials needed, who can help, how long they think it should take to complete and due time.

### **Visual Processing**

- Make a “window frame” by cutting out the center from sturdy paper like an index card or construction paper. Place the cut of the center of the frame over words, numbers, pictures, etc., which keeps the important information in the center while blocking out peripheral material which is distracting to your child.
- Use letter tiles such as those found in commercial games. Have the student find and arrange the correct spelling of a word being studied. Or have the student unscramble letters to form words. In both exercises, the student must concentrate on the correct order of letters.
- Practice estimating distance with your student by throwing a ball and have him/her estimate its distance, then measure it together. You can also practice social distance by having your child judge the appropriate closeness to other people.
- Provide paper for writing and math work that has darker or raised lines to make the boundaries more distinct. Reduce the amount of information on a sheet of paper to maintain the student’s focus.

### **Writing**

- When learning to write difficult letters, try using this special technique. Encourage students to make up meaningful associations to remember difficult letters. For example, with letters “**b**”, “**m**” and “**n**” say the following; **b** has a **belly**, **m** had two **humps**, the **n** has **one**.
- Use special writing paper with raised lines for spelling or writing or raised graphs for math as a sensory guide for the student for staying within the lines or graphs.
- Even if your student uses a word processor for writing, it is still very important to develop and maintain legible writing. Consider balancing a word processor for long involved writing activities and handwriting for short, quick activities.

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## Understanding LD in the Classroom

'What are learning disabilities?' 'What do they look like in my classroom?' and 'How can we help students with learning disabilities (LD) succeed?' In order to frame the responses to these frequently asked questions a current, research-based, national definition of LD<sup>i</sup> is used. This definition, which underlines the capacity of those with learning disabilities to be successful in their elementary, secondary and post-secondary studies, makes evident the measures needed to support secondary graduation and options at the post-secondary level.

The definition targets the following fundamental parameters:

- Learning disabilities are distinct from global intellectual deficiency
- Learning disabilities result from impairments in one or more processes related to perceiving, thinking, remembering or learning
- Learning disabilities range in severity and may affect any or several areas of life
- Learning disabilities are life long
- Learning disabilities are neurobiological and/or genetic in origin

It is important to understand what is meant by each of the statements and what such impairments look like and to recognize that each presents serious implications for educational practices and policies.

### **Learning disabilities are distinct from global intellectual deficiency**

This distinction is important. As such, learning disabilities refer "to a number of disorders which may affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding or use of verbal or nonverbal information. These disorders affect learning in individuals who otherwise demonstrate at least average abilities essential for thinking and/or reasoning,"<sup>ii</sup> In order for students with LD to be able to benefit and learn from the whole educational experience, instructional interventions must be appropriately balanced between general education and remediation. The question remains as to how best to do this.

Ministries of Education/Learning have generally opted for a controversial policy of full inclusion.<sup>iii</sup> Within this approach, the integration of remedial specialists within the general classroom is one model used to address the balance of remediation and education. This model may be more or less successful in providing support for students with LD depending on a number of factors: qualifications of the teacher and specialist, frequency and amount of time allotted per week, time for planning, and curriculum constraints. However, even under the best conditions, there is not enough time or support given to teachers to help them provide the same students (if needed) with materials in alternate format, or in a media, other than print, for the essential concepts of social studies, biology, history and geography. This implies that a number of students with LD miss out on broader learning opportunities, because they cannot easily and meaningfully access the same information as their peers.

Given both remediation and a solid general education, elementary students with LD can learn to the same levels as their peers and make relatively smooth transitions to middle or secondary school.

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In turn, secondary schools must maintain remedial services, while providing accommodations<sup>iv</sup> for poor reading and writing skills. By addressing students' specific learning needs, schools can foster students' engagement, and willingness to take risks and responsibility for learning. Such motivation promotes the completion of secondary studies and, thereby, creates openings to further educational options. At the present time, only a few school districts and provincial/territorial educational authorities offer this balance.

**Learning disabilities result from impairments in one or more processes related to perceiving, thinking, remembering or learning**

For the most part, school related information enters through the eyes (visual perception) and through the ears (auditory perception). Almost simultaneously, such information is 'processed' by different parts of the brain. Examples of these processes are "language processing; phonological processing; visual spatial processing; processing speed; memory and attention; and executive functions (e.g. planning and decision-making)." The following table provides some examples of how these cognitive impairments are manifested.

**Table 1: Examples of some cognitive manifestations of learning disabilities**

<b>Impairments in processes related to:</b>	<b>Perceiving</b>	<b>Thinking</b>	<b>Remembering</b>	<b>Learning</b>
<b>Language Processing</b>	Difficulties in processing sarcasm or understanding when someone is joking  Difficulty taking another's perspective	Difficulties in understanding: long or complex sentence structure; and with figures of speech	Difficulties with: retrieving vocabulary words; orally presented task demands	Difficulties with new vocabulary and responses to teacher-directed questions
<b>Phonological processing</b>	Sounds in words (e.g. bat/bag) are confused; poor sound sequencing in words; limited automaticity in decoding	Difficulty with comprehension of content caused by lack of fluency in decoding	Difficulty retaining sound/symbol correspondence	Difficulty extracting essential concepts due to focus on decoding
<b>Visual spatial processing</b>	Difficulty with oral or written directions for an activity; perceiving organization of ideas in a text	Difficulty identifying main ideas in a text	Difficulty with left/right; north south, hierarchical structures	Poor integration of sequential information (days of the week, recipe)
<b>Processing speed</b>	Poor social interactions; does not keep up with fast-paced lessons	Few connections between isolated bits of information in texts	Slow linking of new with previously learned information	Less material covered or takes extra time and much effort to cover material

<b>Impairments in processes related to:</b>	<b>Perceiving</b>	<b>Thinking</b>	<b>Remembering</b>	<b>Learning</b>
<b>Memory</b>	Few strategies when trying to remember content or concepts	Difficulty writing since spelling may not be automatic	Difficulty retrieving previously learned information	Forgets spelling words after test; difficulty recalling significant events in history; any new learning is difficult
<b>Attention</b>	Difficulty knowing when to pay attention  Poor reading of social situations; impulsive	Poor concentration when putting ideas together	Little effort expended for remembering	Work may be disorganized; goes off on tangents,
<b>Executive functions</b> (planning or decision making)	Poor recognition of value of planning; impulsive	Difficulty problem solving and understanding consequences of decisions	Difficulty in linking new with previously integrated knowledge; Few strategies	Difficulties in higher levels of learning, but has isolated pieces of knowledge

As implied, the impairments “may interfere with the acquisition and use of one or more of the following:

- oral language (e.g. listening, speaking, understanding);
- reading (e.g. decoding, phonetic knowledge, word recognition, comprehension);
- written language (e.g. spelling and written expression); and
- mathematics (e.g. computation, problem solving).<sup>vi</sup>

### **Learning disabilities range in severity and may affect any or several areas of life**

Learning disabilities are identified along a continuum from mild to severe. How an individual’s learning disabilities are classified relates to how significantly they interfere with current learning and with the individual’s ability to function in society. For the most part, persons think of LD as related to academic problems. However, poor organizational skills, poor ability to ‘read’ social situations and to take another’s perspective have significant impact on social interactions within schools, the family, significant relationships, and recreational activities.

In addition, even though students pass their academic courses, the effort required to do this or the ‘just passing’ results may indicate the presence of learning disabilities. (See Table 2.)

**Table 2: Examples of general manifestations of learning disabilities**

<b>Learning disabilities are suggested by:</b>	<b>Examples of some manifestations of the presence of learning disabilities</b>
<b>Unexpected underachievement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Talks well on self-selected topics, but difficulty answering a teacher-directed question</li> <li>- Exhibits knowledge of concepts taught when tested orally, but written test responses are short and do not exhibit same level of understanding</li> <li>- Strengths in reasoning, but weak reading skills</li> </ul>
<b>Unusually high levels of effort and support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Homework completion is very slow when compared to other children</li> <li>- At the college, university level, student asks to reduce course load in order to give extra time to completing work requirements</li> <li>- Individual receives tutoring 3/ 4 hours (or more) per week over several years or in several subjects to keep up with peers</li> </ul>

The range of severity and the variety of academic and social/familial areas in which learning disabilities are manifested implies intervention as soon as the disability becomes apparent, whether in kindergarten, late elementary or secondary school. Intervention should initially consist of pre-referral information from the student's current teacher and a timely and specialized assessment process. Referrals may be recommended when the students are having difficulties in any of the academic areas or when the performance is inconsistent or effortful.

What does such an assessment mean for educators at the primary, secondary and postsecondary level? It implies explicit teaching of specific skills, strategies and the use of tools that are recognized in the current research literature as being part of 'best practices' for this population.<sup>vii</sup> The consequence of an assessment requires interventions that involve the family, the school, the community and the workplace, depending on the needs of the individual.

**Learning disabilities are life long**

Learning disabilities influence the lives of children, adolescents, young adults and adults. However, the "way in which they (learning disabilities) are expressed may vary over an individual's lifetime, depending on the interaction between the demands of the environment and the individual's strengths and needs."<sup>viii</sup> Instructional intervention decision-making must take into account what the individual needs in order to be able to function in a society of the future. Within all levels of schooling, students need to know how to explain their learning disabilities and what accommodations support learning and task completion. Without this self-awareness and ability to appropriately self-advocate, persons with learning disabilities are less likely to participate in successful post-secondary studies.

**Learning disabilities are neurobiological and/or genetic in origin**

What are the causes of learning disabilities? How are they different from other disorders of learning? In general, it is now recognized that:

Learning disabilities are due to genetic and/or neurobiological factors or injury that alters brain functioning in a manner, which affects one or more processes related to learning.<sup>ix</sup>

The neuro-biological basis of LD is supported by current reviews of the literature in the United States<sup>x</sup> and Canada.<sup>xi</sup> Such a basis does not imply that such students cannot learn. Taking the three first processes discussed earlier, it becomes apparent how the difficulties present themselves throughout the academic career of the students with LD.

**Table 3: Examples of manifestations of neurological basis of learning disabilities at different age levels**

Impairments in processes related to:	Examples of some manifestations of the presence of learning disabilities in students at the		
	Elementary Level	Secondary Level	Post-secondary Level
<b>Language Processing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulty with responding to oral task demands</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Task demands no longer a problem, tasks seldom given only orally</li> <li>• Difficulty with learning new vocabulary in geography or history</li> <li>• May have few friends because misreads social interactions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has learned some vocabulary in geography and history, but has difficulty in courses, which require learning specific vocabulary (e.g. geology, medicine)</li> <li>• Difficulty being a roommate</li> </ul>
<b>Phonological processing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulty learning to decode</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Phonetically regular and frequently seen words are decoded, but difficulty with unfamiliar, multi-syllabic words</li> <li>• Difficulty learning to read a 2<sup>nd</sup> language</li> <li>• Tutors necessary to cover the content material</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulty fulfilling the language requirements</li> <li>• Unfamiliar words are skipped, so loses meaning in college level texts</li> <li>• Great effort must be exerted to access unfamiliar words while completing assignments</li> </ul>
<b>Visual spatial processing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulty with letter formation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Handwriting is barely legible</li> <li>• Difficulty with reading maps and understanding longitude and latitude</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses word processing, so handwriting no longer a significant problem</li> <li>• Difficulty getting from one place to another on campus</li> <li>• Difficulty with organization of lab work</li> </ul>

Educators recognize that students with learning disabilities can and do learn, but they must be prepared to review material frequently, to teach compensatory strategies (e.g. note taking skills for those with poor memory), and to present material to be learned in a variety of formats and media.

### **Conclusion**

Knowledgeable persons with the field frequently criticize definitions of 'learning disabilities' for the choice of vocabulary, phrasing and implied ideas. Although there may never be a universally accepted definition, a definition that reflects current research is used here to make evident some of the cognitive and behavioral manifestations of learning disabilities. In turn, one hopes that a better understanding of LD will lead to more cohesion in educational approaches to these students. Canadian educational systems must begin to deal with issues of inadequate elementary and secondary programs for students with learning disabilities. The need for appropriate and timely assessment, remediation, education and accommodations is critical if these individuals are to participate fully in Canadian society.

*Elizabeth Walcot-Gayda, Ph.D. is a Past President of the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada*

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## References

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<sup>i</sup> The LDAC definition of Learning Disabilities (2002) can be found at the following address <http://www.ldac-taac.ca/> or can be requested by post from the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC), 323 Chapel St, #2, Ottawa, ON, K1N 7Z2. (This definition has been adopted and endorsed by LDAC and its provincial affiliates, the Canadian Teachers Federation, National Education Association of Disabled Students, some provincial Ministries of Education, etc.)

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid, para. 1.

<sup>iii</sup> Most definitions of full inclusion imply that the needs of students with learning disabilities are met within the context of a general class.

<sup>iv</sup> The term 'accommodations' refers to practices seen as supporting students with disabilities in learning content material. Examples are extra time for exams, oral exams, taped books, screen readers and voice activated writing tools. (Screen readers are software that reads aloud computer text and information on many websites. For examples see <http://www.kurzweilededu.com/> and <http://www.macspeech.com/>. For an example of a voice activated writing tools see <http://www.speakingsolutions.com/>)

<sup>v</sup> LDAC definition of Learning Disabilities (2002), para. 2.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid, para. 3

<sup>vii</sup> For a website that describes a number of instructional interventions, see <http://www.ldonline.org/>

<sup>viii</sup> LDAC definition of Learning Disabilities (2002), para. 4.

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid., para. 5.

<sup>x</sup> L. Joseph, "The Neurobiological Basis of Reading," *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 34 (6), 2001: 566-579

<sup>xi</sup> C. Fiedorowicz, E. Benezra, W. MacDonald, B. McElgunn, A. Wilson and B. Kaplan, "Neurobiological Basis of Learning Disabilities: An Update," *Learning Disabilities: A Multidisciplinary Journal* 11 (2), 2001: 61-74.