

# Fact Sheet

Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC)  
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## Becoming an Effective Advocate

Parents know their children in a more profound way than anybody else. They have had years living with, observing, reacting to, understanding, and responding to their children. They have learned under what conditions their children cooperate or resist, initiate or follow, interact or withdraw, and when they are most eager to communicate.

As his trusted confidante, you know what really worries him and how complex his problems really are. Likely you are the person who knows how much school failure terrifies him. He has probably asked you, 'What's wrong with my brain?'

As a parent, you are the best person to advocate for your child in making these patterns of behaviour known to your child's teacher. It is especially important so that the teacher can work with your child's particular behaviour and learning pattern rather than against it.

An advocate is a person who effectively speaks up for, acts on behalf of, or supports someone else.

As a parent advocate, you are your child's full-time advocate -- the one with the file, so to speak, on ways to help him succeed socially and at school. You will find others, such as teachers and physicians, who can support you in advocating for your child. Consider these professionals your allies. They can use their influence to assist you in receiving needed services and programs for your child. For example, a family doctor could write a letter to the school board describing the magnitude of your child's anxiety concerning his language immersion program to speed up a placement in a program where he will be taught in his first language.

The classroom teacher is the single most important person affecting your child's education. The teacher has tremendous influence on your child's happiness at school and is the person that spends one-on-one time with your child on a daily basis. It is extremely important for parents and teachers to work together to provide a good school experience for each child.

Parents need to know how and where to get appropriate information then they need to communicate this information convincingly to the appropriate helping source. For example, a parent who is told that his child is behaving immaturely in his grade three class needs to visit the class on a couple of occasions for first-hand knowledge of the problem and its seriousness.

Maybe a trip to the family doctor is in order or a conversation with another adult who works with the child in the community (e.g., the cub leader). If the parent knows that the immature behaviour stems from the fact that a sibling has been in hospital for

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tests, it's best to let the teacher know so the child can get the support he needs during this stressful period. If a child is avoiding specific tasks at school (e.g., reading aloud in front of a group), the parent should understand that there must be a good reason.

A teacher lacking pertinent information about a child's behaviour patterns, has little choice but to assume the same expectations for all students. A predictable outcome: resistance, anger, resistance, and more anger, soon add up to behaviour problems, lack of cooperation, decreased learning. Ongoing parent-teacher contact can help prevent this situation from occurring. As the child gains in academic and social competence and self-esteem, he will be more able to adjust to classroom demands, and even change his behaviour patterns in the process.

However, left unattended, even simple behavioural situations can grow out of control disproportionately, until specialists must be called in to try to peel away the layers of confusion. By this time, the child has lost precious learning time and has deepened his negative self image because of 'his failure.'

Once a teacher understands and can put to use the information provided by the parent, the teacher in turn, can begin to provide the needed support. A child who is receptive to learning, happily reveals to his teacher the most effective way of learning.

This valuable information, the child's learning style, can help the parent and teacher to understand and deal with a child who, for example, 'never remembers what the teacher tells him'. This child is a visual learner, and might need to have visual cues in order to remember. A note on the chalk board could be all that is needed for Johnny to remember to bring his money tomorrow for the play. Another child might rely heavily on his auditory sense and need to hear information to remember it. Still another child may need to hear and see the information simultaneously as well as repeat it aloud. These unique learning styles are academic behaviour patterns that teachers understand and can translate for parents into strategies that they can use with their children at home as well. This information exchange between parent and teacher builds trust that leads to even better communication.

***To be an effective advocate, you should:***

- learn what your rights are and what your child's rights are
- use effective communication in advocating for your rights, by engaging in active listening and being non-threatening
- find the information to make appropriate decisions
- develop problem solving techniques to overcome obstacles
- develop the confidence to do your own advocating
- take appropriate actions
- analyze problems and pinpoint areas of responsibility
- support your child's efforts towards independence
- learn about community resources and agencies
- network with other parents and groups for mutual support and
- connect with your provincial/ territorial Learning Disability Association (LDA) or your local chapter.

*(Adapted from Advocating For your Child with Learning Disabilities, LDAC, (1998).  
Ottawa, Ontario and Exceptional Children's Assistance Center NewsLine)*

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## Fostering Motivation in LD/ADHD Kids

- Steven is 11 and in the fifth grade. His reading problem causes him to read haltingly. On the day he knows he'll be asked to read out loud at school, he develops a stomach ache.
- Maria, age 9, is in the third grade. Her visual perception and fine motor problems interfere with her handwriting, so it takes her an hour to finish one worksheet at night, let alone two or three. The teacher asks her to write more legibly, but she's doing the best she can. She's losing interest in school.
- John is 10, is in the fourth grade, and has been diagnosed as having AD/HD. His schoolwork is fine — when he remembers to bring books home and to turn in his assignments. The teacher says he's "unmotivated."

The truth is that none of these children is "unmotivated." In fact, they're highly motivated — to avoid public humiliation or failure. While children with learning problems must work hard to do well in school, not all struggle emotionally. Why is one child motivated and another gives up before he tries?

### ***What Dampens Motivation?***

Research tells us that the main reasons children with LDs or ADHD withdraw mentally from school is fear of failure, frustration with inconsistent performance (good one day, stumbling the next), lack of understanding the schoolwork, emotional problems, anger, or desire for attention — even negative attention. The behavior that accompanies this dampened motivation may range from quitting ("school is boring"), avoiding any attempt ("I'm stupid; why try?"), clowning (for attention), denying ("I don't care about English"), being impulsive ("There! I'm done!"), or bullying (picking on someone smaller).

We also know that of the brain's various learning systems, if the emotional system is in turmoil, the cognitive system must expend energy on it before the brain can focus to learn. This means you must help your child talk about his feelings before you can figure out how to motivate him to do math or to write essays. Help him to see the pattern of his behavior and to understand why he doesn't feel motivated to succeed at school.

### ***What Fires Motivation?***

Kids will be self-motivated to learn when they:

- Feel competent about something
- Have some choice and control over their learning
- Believe that intelligence isn't fixed at birth
- Feel loved and respected by their parents

### ***Help Your Child Discover His Passions***

Encourage his passions. If your child has a particular strength in school, such as being a math whiz, find ways outside of school to expose him to math in the real world — computers, hands-on science museums, and math camps. If he struggles with most school subjects, look elsewhere for his passions. Pay attention to whatever makes your child perk up. Is it animals? Plants? Music? Art? Dinosaurs? Video games? Skateboards? To play on these passions, help your child deepen his knowledge. For example, if your Internet provider allows you space for a

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family website, let the child help build one on his favorite subject. He could research and write about the foremost skateboard athletes in the world. Post his drawings of himself skateboarding the galaxy. List unanswered questions about skateboards. Let family and friends interact with the website, too — what else would they like to know from your in-house skateboard expert?

### ***Give Your Child Some Choices***

Help children develop a sense of control by presenting things they do not want to do as choices. For example, let a child decide whether to do homework before or after dinner. At school, consider letting a child who dislikes chorus participate in the spring performance by selling tickets.

### ***Help Your Child Develop Persistence***

A child's beliefs about intelligence affect his motivation to succeed. If he believes intelligence is fixed at birth and he missed out, he is liable to quit without trying. If, on the other hand, you help him to understand that persistence is more important than the luck of the draw, you promote a child who can learn to succeed on his own terms. This is the struggling child who changes from saying, "What's the use?" to "I've learned how to slow down and double-check my work." Tell your child, in every way you can, that brainpower is something you acquire. Make the following sayings (or their age-appropriate equivalents) your family mantras:

- "Success is 1% inspiration, 99% perspiration."
- "Geniuses are made, not born."

### ***Let Your Child Know You Love and Respect Him***

Every child needs to feel that his parents are on his side. You can demonstrate your love and respect for your child with learning problems by accepting, connecting, and supporting, no matter what. You still love him, even when he forgets his assignment. You're interested in the details of each day. And when he's upset, you help him to give words to feelings. Respect your child by helping him understand not only his specific learning difficulties, but strategies for coping in school.

### ***Help Your Child Identify Steps to Success***

If you help him identify small, concrete steps to reach his learning goals, you can recognize each accomplishment along the way, no matter how big or small. Then the effort of learning is valued as much as the outcome in school. Help your child learn to set attainable learning goals, such as studying a math concept from a variety of angles until he understands it. This might mean that you must be content with something like a C grade in Math — but an A+ in Effort.

It will be important to communicate regularly with your child's teacher so all of you (parents, teacher, and child) can work as a united team. With the teacher's help and ideas, your child's learning goals will be supported both at school and at home. You also want your child to learn that making mistakes is a natural part of the process of learning. Thomas Edison, said to have tried 10,000 times to perfect the light bulb, said, "I didn't fail. I just discovered another way not to invent the electric light bulb."

### ***Foster Long-term Motivation***

Research tells us that parents who encourage a child's self-sufficiency often have children who are motivated from the inside, out. This means holding back a little before you jump in to help your struggling child. Children with learning disabilities are especially vulnerable to developing perceptions of themselves as academically incompetent and to develop low expectations for success. We sometimes provide more help than children with learning problems or AD/HD actually need. This takes away from their own pride in accomplishment and the enthusiasm that a sense of achievement and competence can produce.

Children with learning difficulties often have a marvelous ability to see the world in new ways. When you guide your child to pursue his interests, operate from his strengths, and not shy away from challenges, you help him build a positive cycle of accomplishment and self-motivation. Celebrate each hard-won stumbling step your child takes on the way to learning and developing strengths, so that in the long run, he can sustain his motivation — and passion — for learning.

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## Tips for Managing Family Friction

### ***Working with your Child:***

- Sort out the reasonable part of the relative's request from the inappropriate manner in which it was expressed to your child. Rephrase the request in a way your child will respond to more positively. This will model a better approach to managing your child's behaviour – both for him and the adult who's criticized him.
- If discussing hard feelings after-the-fact causes your child to get worked up again, calmly tell him that you thought a certain relative's request was appropriate, but that she didn't make it in a respectful way. Empathize with how that made your child feel.
- Help your child learn not to assume responsibility (or blame himself) for the behaviour of other people.
- Teach your child the value of performing helpful tasks at family functions. Having a 'job' will make your child feel involved, useful, and busy! As he gets older, encourage him to volunteer his help to whoever is hosting the event.

### ***Working with family members:***

- Remind family members gently and often that your child has a real disorder, which makes it difficult for him to manage social situations and regulate his own behaviour.
- Explain that you have expectations for your child's behaviour but he can't always be held to the same standards as other kids are.
- Recommend articles to relatives and invite them to ask you questions and express their concerns about your child's difficulties.
- Accept the fact that some relatives will come to appreciate and support your child's struggle, but others may not.

### ***Working with siblings:***

Siblings of children with LD often express confusion and disappointment about getting less attention from their parents than their sibling with LD. Due in part to parents' limited time, their energy and focus may be on helping their child with LD get through school and life. It can be difficult to manage the intense needs of a child with LD while

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at the same time give ample attention to the other kids in the family. Parents often feel guilty about the amount of attention and time given to their child with LD and worry about ways to balance the inequities.

Here are some ways to be creative and help your other kids feel just as special and important:

- Dedicate one activity or part of the day on the weekend to your children who don't have LD.
- Spend consistent one-on-one time with your children and express how special this time is to you.
- Celebrate the academic success of all your children even if your child with LD is doing great in school.

***What, then, can parents do to help other children in the family become more accepting of a sibling who has learning disabilities? Here are a few suggestions:***

- Inform the child as honestly as possible about their brother or sister's problem, not necessarily in terms of a label, but rather in descriptive terms at their level of understanding. Some children's books may be used for sharing and illustration:
  - *The Summer of the Swan* by William Allen White (about a trumpeter swan without a voice, i.e., a learning disability)
  - *Kelly's Creek* by Doris Buchanan Smith (a boy with learning disabilities who loves nature)
  - *When Learning is Tough* by Cynthia Roby (kids talk about their learning disabilities)
  - *The Survival Guide for Kids with LD* by Gary Fisher and Rhoda Cummings (practical questions and answers).
- Acknowledge and accept the child's feelings about her brother or sister with LD, understanding she must feel deprived of attention, jealous at times, and even resentful. Those feelings are normal and not a cause for guilt or recrimination.
- Let your child know that he is not responsible for his sibling with LD and will only be asked to help when absolutely necessary.
- Find ways for each child in the family to gain recognition and a feeling of self-worth.
- Acknowledge they are separate people, appreciated and loved for who they are rather than for what they can achieve.

In other words, parents can create a safe and secure environment for siblings of children with LD by not expecting more of them than is appropriate, by informing them about learning disabilities, by answering their questions and concerns as honestly as possible, and by letting them know it is acceptable and safe to share their thoughts and feelings with you.