

Webinar Transcript : LDs What they are and how they impact students

- So hi and welcome to the webinar Learning Disabilities: What They Are and How They Impact Students. My name is Beth Pollock and I'm a clinical neuropsychologist and the clinical director of the Regional Assessment Resource Center. We appreciate the invitation from the LDAO to partner with them to bring you this webinar. So to provide an overview of today's talk, I'm gonna start by providing an introduction to the Regional Assessment Resource Center. We are then going to move into an overview of learning disabilities and discuss the impact that learning disabilities have on a student's developing self-esteem and general mental wellbeing. We are then going to move into a brief talk about the importance of assessment, interventions, and supports to address the learning needs of students with learning disabilities. Finally, we'll end with a discussion on how to talk to your child about learning disabilities to promote their understanding and self-confidence. So just a little bit about the Regional Assessment Resource Center or RARC for short. It came out of the recommendations of the Learning Opportunities Task Force.

So way back in 1997, the Honorable Ernie Eves, then treasure and subsequent Premier of Ontario, made the following statement as part of his budget speech. "Too few students with learning disabilities get the help that they need to make the transition to college or university. To help these students realize their potential, we'll establish pilot projects at the college or university level to provide real help to learning disabled students in a meaningful way." The Learning Opportunities Task Force under the leadership of Dr. Betty Stephenson, a former minister of education, is the mechanism through which these pilot projects were established with a clear mandate, one, to improve the transition of students with specific learning disabilities from secondary to post-secondary education, and two, to enhance the services and supports that students with learning disabilities receive within the post-secondary educational sector such that they can complete their education successfully. One of the key findings for the learning opportunities task force was that a significant majority of students arrived at their post-secondary institution with no or, at best, inadequate diagnostic information. As a result, students had neither appropriate documentation nor a real understanding of their own learning disabilities. As such, the Learning Opportunities Task Force recommended the establishment of ARCs or assessment resource centers, so funded by the Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities and housed at Queens University, RARC was established in 2002, and our sister organization, the Northern Ontario Assessment Resource Center, or NORARC housed at Cambrian College, was established in 2004. Together we ensure that students with learning disabilities entering or attending post-secondary education have access to timely, comprehensive, and affordable psychoeducational assessments to provide students with a documentation and knowledge needed to access accommodations and supports to minimize the impact of identified impairments.

Shortly after opening our doors, we realized that assessments in and of themselves were not sufficient to help our students, and we developed a number of transition programs to equip students with a knowledge, tools, and skills required to succeed throughout their educational journey. We also expanded our assessment and transition programs to include all students with

Webinar Transcript : LDs What they are and how they impact students

neurodevelopmental disorders, including students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and those with autism spectrum disorder. Further, we developed a productive research program in the areas of assessment and accommodations. Finally, we provide training to accessibility and student support services, educators, clinicians, and the public to promote a better understanding of neurodevelopmental disorders and effective assessment, accommodations, and supports for students with these conditions. If you're interested in learning more about our services and programs, feel free to go to our website at www.queensu.ca/rarc. So we're gonna start today with a brief overview of learning disabilities. So learning disabilities are often conceptualized as unexpected learning failure, specifically the student is otherwise able to access the curriculum, but due to a specific cognitive processing deficit, such a weakness in phonological processing, orthographic processing, language, working memory, et cetera, they struggle to acquire and demonstrate reading, writing, and/or math skills. Given the heterogeneity of learning disabilities, we're going to look at impairments in each of these areas in turn, but it's important to recognize that these issues can co-occur such that you can have a learning disability in just reading or math or in reading and writing or in reading, writing, and math.

Even a learning disability in reading presents in a variety of ways due to the specific cognitive processing weakness and its impact on reading skill developments. Often related to a phonological processing weakness, students may have difficulty decoding words when reading. On the other hand, they may have really strong phonemic decoding skills, but they may over rely on those skills even when it's an irregular word and it's not gonna work. That's often due to an orthographic or visual processing weakness. Frequently related to challenges with phonemic and/or orthographic processing, they may struggle to read fluently resulting in reading that's slow, inaccurate, or both. Fluency issues may also be identified in students who struggle initially to acquire basic reading skills but have improved, but they have not had the same longevity of reading experience as they're typically developing peers. Issues with word identification, fluency, as well as cognitive processing challenges in working memory or general language may affect a student's reading comprehension or ability to take meaning from written materials. As such, reading disabilities may present at the word reading level, at the fluency level, or at the comprehension level.

An identification of the specific cognitive processing impairment and its specific impacts is important to lead to appropriate interventions and supports. In the writing domain, students may struggle with the motor act of writing letters and words leading to poor intelligibility of the written output and/or difficulties focusing on those higher order writing processes due to an overfocus on the writing motor level. Due to phonological or orthographic processes challenges, students may struggle with a process of spelling words accurately. General cognitive processing weaknesses and language may affect their ability to express their ideas in writing using appropriate grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure. Often due to executive functioning challenges, students might struggle to organize and structure their ideas in writing. Students may additionally or solely struggle with the development of their math skills related to weak

Webinar Transcript : LDs What they are and how they impact students

working memory skills. They may struggle to follow through with multi-step operations and calculations. Often related to challenges with visual spatial analysis or executive functioning, they may have difficulty understanding higher order mathematical concepts and solving word problems. Again, identifying the why and the specific impacts for the student on their numeracy skill developments will help guide appropriate interventions and supports. So what is the impact of having a learning disability? Well, we've all had experiences when we struggle to learn whether it was in school, on a new job, or when learning a new language. We may temporarily find it hard to process the materials presented or concepts taught, and as a result, feel that instruction is moving too quickly or making demands on you that you cannot meet. If this situation's extended, we might start comparing ourselves against our peers, feeling that they must be smarter, or that there might be something wrong with us and our own abilities. We might start feeling that we are stupid, slow, or dumb. Our self-esteem and confidence may be negatively affected as a result, which may impact on our willingness to persevere with what we perceive as tasks that we're unable to complete. Compound this with the developmental stage of childhood and adolescence when we're developing our understanding of ourselves and our abilities. Our children with learning disabilities spend long periods of time being asked to engage in academic tasks that they struggle with and if not addressed, often come to the conclusion that they are incapable of learning, particularly when they encounter repeated academic failures.

Not surprisingly, children with learning disabilities are at risk for having lower self-esteem, and those feelings can generalize and contribute to things like school avoidance, those tummy aches, those headaches, not wanting to go. It can contribute to acting out behaviors. Sometimes it's easier to punch the child beside you than have to read out loud. And sometimes even contributes to symptoms of depression or anxiety. Further, children who stand out because of learning disabilities can be at risk of being teased or bullied by their peers, further affecting their self-worth. So what can we do? So obviously the first step of this is identifying there's a problem. As you can see from the proceeding discussion, there are serious impacts for letting a learning disability be unidentified and unaddressed. Students who don't know why they struggle will often conclude erroneously that they are an incapable learner instead of understanding that their brain just learns differently and they, therefore, just need different tools, strategies, and supports to access the curriculum.

They may feel confused, insecure, frustrated, hopeless, stressed, lost, and generally exhausted. Undergoing assessment, whether a psychoeducational or neuropsychological evaluation is therefore paramount to helping students better understand their learning profile, including their learning needs, but also their learning strengths that can be capitalized upon. An assessment helps 'em to understand that they are capable, but due to a cognitive processing difference, it makes learning in the typical way more challenging for them. This increased understanding of their learning profile can also help the student understand why certain interventions, tools, or strategies may work for them, allowing them greater knowledge of how to support themselves as a learner. The goal of these assessments is to leave the student feeling

Webinar Transcript : LDs What they are and how they impact students

better understood, confident, motivated, and optimistic, better equipped with the knowledge and skills that they require for success. Assessments also provide those who teach and support the student with a learning disability, a better understanding of how to work with a student in a capacity that's less frustrating for all involved. Results from the evaluation are often used to determine appropriate interventions for the student to address the cognitive processing weakness when possible, but also to determine the most evidence-based remediation strategies.

Results are also often used to develop or refine a student's individual education plan, often referred to as an IEP, to ensure that the student's learning needs are being met. IEP student support students through a variety of needs. First, modifications, typically available in elementary school, allow the student to develop their literacy and/or numeracy skills at their own pace by matching their programming to their ability level rather than continuing to see the students struggle to access grade-level curriculum without success. Second, accommodations, typically available at all stages of education, identify the most appropriate tools and approaches for the student while they access grade-level material. For example, a student with a learning disability in, say, reading fluency may just need additional time to complete tests and exams with a great deal of reading. A student with a learning disability in spelling may need to use a computer equipped with spell check software to review their written work prior to submission. Third, alternate programs, available formally in elementary and secondary school and informally in post-secondary education, allow students an opportunity to improve malleable skills such as work habits, task perseverance, and test anxiety by creating short and long-term goals, as well as the strategies to overcome their areas of difficulty.

So given how specific accommodations, interventions, and support should be, it is highly recommended that assessments be conducted initially when the student's academic challenges manifest, but also prior to each subsequent educational transition from elementary to secondary, from secondary post-secondary, and even sometimes from the post-secondary to the employment environment. This allows the student an updated understanding of their changing cognitive and academic profile to equip them with the knowledge to understand their learning needs and advocate effectively for required tools. It also allows an opportunity to reevaluate the student's accommodations, tools used, and strategies implemented, ensuring that they are appropriate for the student's age and stage. In general, accommodations and support should actually reduce, become more specific, and promote independence more as a student processes through or their journey as a student. For example, when a student struggles with basic literacy and numeracy concepts in early elementary school, they may require a more teacher dependent support, such as a person who provides reading and scribing for them during tests.

As they get older, however, the student can transition to a student-led accommodation, such as use of electronic text-to-speech and speech-to-text software to complete tasks independently. Similarly, with regards to note taking, a student with challenges with working memory and/or the motor act of writing may require access to a copy of notes from their teachers initially, but as they learn to use available supports, can start using a computer to type

Webinar Transcript : LDs What they are and how they impact students

their notes and/or use a note-taking tool, such a recorder to obtain a complete record of the lecture themselves. This movement from teacher-led to student-led accommodations reinforces that students with disabilities can complete the same task as their peers, but they might just have to use a different tool or strategy to get there. Equipping students with the knowledge and tools they need to succeed reinforces that they are a capable learner and can strengthen their self-esteem and sense of self-worth. Now we'll turn to discussion of how to talk to your child about their learning disability.

First of all, it is helpful to talk openly about your own learning strengths and needs, your child's, and the learning profiles of others. When learning differences are not discussed, children may feel that it is a shameful secret or that they're the only ones that are going through it. Bringing the discussion into everyday conversation helps children appreciate that we all learn differently, which makes some tasks easier for us and some more difficult for us to complete independently. They are not alone.

Second, allow your child to ask questions and share their struggles and anxieties about their learning without discrediting their feelings. Without the appropriate knowledge and skills, a child with a learning disability often spends a great deal of time in the day struggling and comparing themselves, often negatively, against their peers. Let them share how they feel openly without resorting to problem solving mode too quickly. Sometimes children and youth just wanna be understood and listened to. You can reflect in what they tell you that they're struggling with and come back to them later to collaboratively discuss any interventions, tools, strategies, or knowledge the student or the teacher might need to improve the student's ability to access the curriculum to reduce that frustration.

Third, listen openly to your child. This helps you identify not only kind of what's going on for them and what's coming up for them, but also if they have any misconceptions about their learning disability. If your child knows nothing about their learning disability, they can often form their own conclusions and too often, these conclusions are negative. Teach them about the facts about the learning disabilities. For example, you could share that having a learning disability doesn't mean that they aren't intelligent. In fact, it's often called a specific learning disability because it relates to specific areas of learning difficulty and not global challenges with information processing. You could also say that learning differences result from the way their brain processes information. It doesn't mean that they're lazy, incompetent, or incapable of learning. You could raise that their brain just might need a little bit more time or access to specific tools or specific learning methods to master a concept, but they can still get there. Finally, know that students with learning disabilities can still learn at high levels and be successful in life. They just need to use the appropriate strategies, tools, or supports to succeed. In addition, help your student appreciate areas where they shine instead of the conversation always falling on or focusing on the areas where they struggle.

Too many times I've seen the focus being on where the students' learning needs are, with teachers and parents pulling them from other subjects to provide time for remediation. I can see the appeal of this approach. Why keep them in physical education or even math class if they

Webinar Transcript : LDs What they are and how they impact students

already excel in this area and the time could be used to put them in a dedicated literacy remediation program? However, the student is then spending more and more time engaging in tasks that are hard for them rather than getting periods of relief when they can easily learn and demonstrate their skills and abilities. Ensure that they have a balance in the curriculum to let them experience periods when they feel like a capable learner and can shine. Not only in regards to academics, to strengthen your child's self-esteem, it's important to nurture your child's non-academic strengths.

Enroll your child in clubs, groups, and activities where they thrive. This helps students self-appraisal go from being, "I'm not good at anything" to, "There are some things I find difficult to do, but there's other things that I'm really good at", whether sports, music, coding, robotics club, fishing, girl guides, 4H, encourage your child to explore their interests and don't sacrifice their involvement in these types of activities to make them spend more time in academic skill remediation. Spend quality child time with your child. In the busy pace of daily life, we can find ourselves stuck in a cycle where we're only interacting with our child when attempting to move them from one activity or task to another, when completing homework, which can be a nightly battle for parents of children with learning disabilities, or when distracted by completing another task such as making dinner. Find opportunities to spend meaningful time together when your child can speak to you openly and you have the mental resources and energy to really listen.

After all the negatives that a child with a learning disability can experience, interspersing their daily life with as much positive attention as possible can make a big difference in their sense of self-worth. Praise their effort, not the outcome. Don't worry about the grade on the report card. Instead, focus positive attention on demonstrations of task perseverance, times when the child asks for assistance, instead of shutting down, and incidences when you know your child has tried their best, celebrate the smallest successes. When possible, connect students with others who have learning differences to help them see that they're not alone. Through our implementation of transition programs, we've seen the benefit of bringing students with learning disabilities together.

They are often surprised when they see other students that they've met through other means and never imagined that they also had a learning disability. This helps a student with a learning disability appreciate that it's not a scarlet letter, something that defines them as a person. Congregated programming also allows students to explore tools and strategies that might work for them without fear of judgment, as well as all the students are struggling with some aspect of learning helps them feel they're not alone. Ultimately, we want students to be able to confidently say, "I learn differently", without shame or embarrassment. In this webinar, we discussed what learning disabilities are, how they impact student self-esteem, and mental wellbeing, as well as how assessments, interventions, accommodations, and parental support can equip students with the skills, strategies, and tools needed to succeed.

With these skills in place, students will be able to advocate for themselves in and out of the classroom. For more information and self-advocacy, watch a companion webinar: Fostering

Webinar Transcript : LDs What they are and how they impact students

Self-Advocacy Skills in Students with LD by my colleague Alison Parker. Thank you for watching this webinar.

I hope it was helpful to you. If you'd like to learn more about the work we do at RARC or about our transition programs, please visit our website www.queensu.ca/rarc, or send us an email. Thank you and have a great day.