# Adults With Learning Disabilities: A Call to Action

*National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities*

*WHEREAS, the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) "Position Statement on Language Learning Disorders" is concerned primarily with the role of the speech-language pathologist in learning disabilities with school age children and youth, and*

*WHEREAS, there is a need for information on serving the adult with learning disabilities, and*

*WHEREAS, ASHA representatives to the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities have cooperated with other national organizations to arrive at consensus on the recommendations for meeting the needs of the adult with learning disabilities, and*

*WHEREAS, ASHA members are concerned not only about children and youth who have learning disabilities but adults also; therefore*

*LC 57-83. RESOLVED, That the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) endorses in concept the position paper of the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) titled Adults with Learning Disabilities: A Call to Action, and further*

*RESOLVED, That the Executive Board communicate to the NJCLD, ASHA's support for the concepts embodied in the position paper; and further*

*RESOLVED, That the NJCLD position paper be published in* Asha. (Executive Board)

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association has endorsed the following position paper of the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities. For further information, contact Stan Dublinski, Director, State/Regulatory Policy, ASHA.

Reference this material as: The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities. Adults With Learning Disabilities: A Call to Action. A position paper of the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, February 10, 1985. The Orton Dyslexia Society, Baltimore, MD.

Index terms: Learning disabilities, adults, National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD), assessment (see diagnostics, evaluations), education

Learning disabilities are a heterogeneous group of disorders of presumed neurological origin that persist into adult life to varying degrees and with different outcomes. Although many adults with learning disabilities are successful, many are not. A large number of adolescents with learning disabilities do not complete high school. Still other individuals have difficulty gaining admission to or completing postsecondary education programs including college or vocational preparation courses.

The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) is concerned with those issues related to learning disabilities as manifested in adults. The purpose of this position paper is to identify these issues and to propose ways for exploring and resolving the problems encountered by adults with learning disabilities.

The following concerns need to be addressed when the problems of adults with learning disabilities are considered.

1. Learning disabilities are both persistent and pervasive throughout an individual's life. The manifestations of the learning disability can be expected to change throughout the life span of the individual.

2. At present there is a paucity of appropriate diagnostic procedures for assessing and determining the status and needs of adults with learning disabilities. This situation has resulted in the misuse and misinterpretation of tests that have been designed for and standardized on younger people.

3. Older adolescents and adults with learning disabilities frequently are denied access to appropriate academic instruction, prevocational preparation, and career counseling necessary for the development of adult abilities and skills.

4. Few professionals have been prepared adequately to work with adults who demonstrate learning disabilities.

5. Employers frequently do not have the awareness, knowledge of, nor sensitivity to the needs of

adults with learning disabilities. Corporate as well as public and private agencies have been unaware and therefore have failed to accept their responsibility to develop and implement programs for adults with learning disabilities.

6. Adults with learning disabilities may experience personal, social, and emotional difficulties that may affect their adaptation to life tasks. These difficulties may be an integral aspect of the learning disability or may have resulted from past experiences with others who were unable or unwilling to accept, understand, or cope with the persons' disabilities.

7. Advocacy efforts on behalf of adults with learning disabilities currently are inadequate.

8. Federal, state, and private funding agencies concerned with learning disabilities have not supported program development initiatives for adults with learning disabilities.

In light of these concerns, the NJCLD makes the following recommendations.

1. *Programs must be initiated to increase public and professional awareness and understanding of the manifestations and needs of adults with learning disabilities.* A coalition is needed among professionals, adults with learning disabilities, and parent groups that will design and provide systematic programs to inform the public about adults with learning disabilities. The program should include information about the following:

- the heterogeneity of learning disabilities;
- the characteristics as well as the persistent and pervasive nature of learning disabilities;
- the changing manifestations of learning disabilities;
- the variations in cognition, communication, and individual learning styles demonstrated by adults with learning disabilities;
- the social and emotional consequences of learning disabilities for adult adjustment; and
- the implications of learning disabilities for future academic or career achievements.

An understanding of these facts is essential for effective planning, design, and implementation of appropriate education and vocational training programs.

2. *Selection of appropriate education and vocational training programs and employment for adults with learning disabilities is predicated on a clear understanding of how their condition influences their learning and performance.* Program selection and the choice of intervention strategies must be based on the results of a comprehensive and integrated assessment of the individual that will provide a description of specific patterns of abilities and disabilities.

Decisions pertinent to program selection and placement are influenced by many factors. Among these factors are the following:

- the individual's patterns of abilities and disabilities;
- the skills required for successful performance in a specific work setting;
- the available range of instructional or training program options;
- the availability of community and on-job support services (e.g., counseling, support groups), as well as consultative and direct therapy services;
- the education and vocational training philosophy of the service or employment agency;
- the competence and experience of those professionals and other individuals providing services for adults with learning disabilities; and
- the attitudes and beliefs of those within the public and private sector about adults with learning disabilities.

3. *Throughout the school years, individuals with learning disabilities must have access to a range of program and service options that will prepare them to make the transition from secondary to postsecondary or vocational training settings.* Continued emphasis on remediation of basic academic skills, provision of adaptive curricula, and enhancement of study skills is important. It is also imperative to provide programs that will facilitate the development of social and interpersonal skills as well as employable skills. This may require radical changes in some of our current practices.

- Continuing review is necessary throughout the school years so as to monitor the individual's current status and needs. This review of the individual's status and needs is essential if responsible professionals are to ensure that appropriate education and prevocational services are provided.
- Career counseling and vocational programs should be initiated during the early school years. Adults with learning disabilities and their parents should be provided with information concerning ranges of career options and programs. Selection of career options must be based on an appreciation of their abilities.
- To facilitate social adaptation, counseling as well as individual and peer group experiences

should be provided for students with learning disabilities. These experiences are intended

- to enhance interpersonal and social skills;
- to foster an ability to deal with new situations;
- to develop an appreciation for oneself; and
- to foster the development of autonomy, self-advocacy, and independent living skills.

4. *Alternative programs and services must be provided for adults with learning disabilities who have failed to obtain a high school diploma.* Many adults with learning disabilities fail to achieve a high school diploma. Some adults with learning disabilities are school dropouts, while others remained in school but were unable to meet minimum competency test requirements necessary for the high school diploma. Few of these individuals ever pursue the General Equivalency Diploma or other alternatives to achieve the diploma. In response to these observations, the following actions are recommended:

- Educate school personnel about those factors that are predictive of school dropout.
- Mandate federal, state, and local authorities to establish programs for truancy and school dropout prevention for individuals with learning disabilities.
- Educate individuals with learning disabilities about alternatives available to them in achieving the high school diploma.

5. *Adults with learning disabilities must have an active role in determining the course of their postsecondary or vocational efforts.* To facilitate that role, all concerned with assisting adults who have learning disabilities need to ensure their

- right to choose and opportunity to decide,
- knowledge of options and responsibilities of choice,
- right to risk and invest in their choice,
- opportunity to learn through experience and failure,
- right to change employment settings and activities.

6. *Consistent with the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and regulations implementing Section 504 of that Act, appropriate federal, state, and local agencies as well as postsecondary and vocational training programs should continue the development and implementation of effective programs that will allow adults with learning disabilities the opportunity to attain career goals. Also, consistent with Section 504, postsecondary programs, colleges, vocational schools, employers, and governmental agencies should be aware of the nondiscriminatory testing requirements for the handicapped.* If adults with learning disabilities are to gain access to and profit from postsecondary or vocational training programs, innovative planning and collaborations will be necessary among those agencies and personnel working with and concerned for their needs. These planning consortia should include adults with learning disabilities and also may include their families.

a. Postsecondary Programs — Those persons responsible for planning postsecondary programs for individuals with learning disabilities should establish an interdisciplinary advisory council that will develop, implement, and monitor necessary procedures and services. Such procedures and services should include, among others, the following:

- admission criteria and procedures;
- assessment procedures for determining the individual's status and needs;
- guidelines for course selection and sequences;
- guidelines on alternative methods for evaluating the student's learning of course content material (e.g., oral instead of written examinations and the use of untimed examinations);
- support systems that will assist, as needed, with the development of study skills, reasoning abilities, and decision-making skills as well as the enhancement of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and mathematical abilities;
- the use of modified methods of instruction as indicated;
- the opportunity for individual and group psychological assistance;
- the establishment of peer support groups; and
- the opportunity for career counseling.

b. Vocational Training — The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, including Section 504, mandates that vocational training programs be available to adults with learning disabilities. In response to the law, public and private sectors have developed diverse and often unrelated programs for vocational training and preparation. The consequent lack of interagency planning and program coordination has caused confusion. This has prevented many adults with learning disabilities from gaining access to appropriate training programs. If responsible vocational training agencies and rehabilitation centers are to meet successfully the needs of adults with learning disabilities, these agencies and centers should coordinate plans and guidelines that will address among other issues the following:

- referral procedures;
- eligibility criteria;
- assessment procedures and methods;
- counseling procedures and program planning;
- job placement, job holding, employment retention, and follow-up procedures;
- employment performance and evaluation procedures; and
- procedures for provision of support services as needed.

c. Employment Opportunities — Education and rehabilitation agencies should develop effective liaisons with business, industry, unions, and civil service employment agencies. These networks are essential to facilitate the transition, training, and employment of adults with learning disabilities. In addition, these liaisons and networks will ensure appropriate management of adults currently in the workforce. Finally, the armed forces should design and implement effective programs for the assessment's training and care of adults with learning disabilities who are within the various service branches.

Employers should develop an awareness and knowledge of the needs of adults with learning disabilities. Having identified the skills required to complete a specific job, industry will need to collaborate with vocational rehabilitation and training agencies in preparing adults with learning disabilities to enter and successfully remain within the workforce. Many adults with learning disabilities will need to use vocational, technical, and continuing adult education programs, and other community resources to acquire skills and abilities necessary to compete actively and succeed in the workforce.

7. *The development of systematic programs of research that will address the status and needs of adults with learning disabilities is essential for the provision of appropriate services.* Among the many issues that need to be addressed are the following:

- the types, characteristics, and changing manifestations of learning disabilities during the course of adult growth;
- the relationship between learning disabilities and adult psychosocial maladjustments, including substance abuse, depression, and suicides;
- the performance differences of adults with learning disabilities in various educational, mental health, and vocational settings;
- the status and needs of adults with learning disabilities who are in prisons;
- the patterns of outcomes for adults with learning disabilities who dropped out of or graduated from public or private secondary education programs;
- the impact of minimum competency testing requirements for individuals with learning disabilities; and
- the effects of minimum competency test modifications on the pass and fail rates among individuals with learning disabilities.

8. *Curricula must be developed and incorporated in preparation programs for professionals in such disciplines as education, vocational and rehabilitative counseling, social work, psychology, medicine, and law to inform these professionals about the problems and needs of adults with learning disabilities.* While preparation of personnel who provide services to individuals with learning disabilities is presented elsewhere,[1] it is important to emphasize continuing education as a principal means for providing professionals currently in practice with information about the problems and needs of adults with learning disabilities.

9. *Mental health professionals must be aware of the unique personal, social and emotional difficulties that individuals with learning disabilities may experience throughout their lives.* For some individuals, these difficulties may be an integral aspect of the learning disability. For many others, these emotional difficulties result from life experiences. The emotional difficulties are manifested in different forms that include, among others, disturbed patterns of interaction with spouses and children and disturbances in social relations. Throughout their lives some individuals with learning disabilities have interacted with teachers, parents, peers, and others who were not prepared or willing to understand their needs or to help them cope with their problems. These nonfacilitating interactions contributed to the development of severe emotional disorders for some individuals.

Mental health professionals must be prepared to prevent and treat the possible psychological sequelae associated with persistent learning disabilities. These sequelae might include, but not be limited to, antisocial behavior, chronic depression, suicide, and substance abuse. For adults with learning disabilities, the inevitable consequences of attempts to cope in a society that makes demands without understanding

[1] Learning Disabilities: Issues in the preparation of professional personnel. (1983, September 16). A position paper of the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities. Baltimore, MD: The Orton Dyslexia Society.

and that imposes without sensitivity are all too apparent.

The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities is a committee of cooperating organizations with individuals with learning disabilities. Organizations represented and representatives for the February 1985 meeting included:

Association for Children and Adults with Learning Disabilities

Anne Fleming, Doris Johnson

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association

Anthony Bashir, Katharine Butler, Stan Dublinske

Council for Learning Disabilities

Donald Crump, Don Hammill

Division for Children with Communication Disorders, Council for Exceptional Children

Thomas O'Toole, Joel Stark, Rhonda Work

Division for Learning Disabilities — Council for Exceptional Children

Jeannette Fleischner, Sister Marie Grant

International Reading Association

Jules Abrams

National Association of School Psychologists

Nell Browning, Kevin Dwyer

The Orton Dyslexia Society

Drake Duane, Bill Ellis, Sylvia Richardson

This copy was forwarded for final approval and adoption to the governing body of the member associations, and adoption is final.

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