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Things Kids Say About Living With Learning Disabilities

While parents invite their kids to share their experiences of having a learning difference, they don't always believe that they're getting the "full story" from their kids.

In the spring of 2000, Schwab Learning set out to capture the experiences of elementary school kids who are struggling in school. We talked to kids with learning disabilities (LD) about their day-to-day lives, hopes, dreams, and fears. Each child interviewed expressed a unique experience with school and life, but some common themes emerged.

Common Themes

"I just wanna be smart!"

If you had to guess what the number one thing kids daydream about, what would you say? Have lots of friends? Look good? The truth is that kids do have an interest in learning and being smart. They want self-satisfaction and recognition from parents and teachers that they are indeed smart. So, it's no wonder that when kids don't do well in school, even when given extra help, they feel dumb. They get embarrassed, frustrated, laughed at, and angry with themselves for not succeeding. "I get disappointed in myself and it makes me not want to go back to school."

"I know my mom is keeping secrets from me, and I don't like it when people talk behind my back."

It's very clear to kids when they're not told the whole story about their learning struggles. They don't feel included in conversations about their learning difficulties, both at home and school. In a way, they feel like things are being done "to" them and not "with" them. They get pulled out of classes, taken out of familiar schools, and spend extra time on schoolwork instead of participating in fun activities like their siblings and peers.

Once a child is identified with a learning disability (LD), the changes that occur at home and school seem endless. One overarching theme expressed by kids was that they truly didn't understand what was happening to them. "One day, my mom told me that I had to go to another school. I was really mad because I had to leave my friends and all the stuff that I knew. I still don't know why she made me go."

"No one knows what I'm going through."

Kids in general feel alone in their experiences, but kids who are struggling to learn feel even more isolated. They feel like no one understands them. Struggling in school is definitely not a topic they would bring up with other people, especially their friends, for fear of being made fun of them. "It would feel good to talk to my family and friends about my learning because then I wouldn't feel out of place anymore. But I know I can't."

What You Can Do

Praise, praise, praise.

Your child needs to be recognized and encouraged for things that he CAN do well. Is he a great runner, musician, or artist? Does he help around the house? Make an effort to give him praise for

the little things he does. For example, you can say, "I really liked the way you did your chores tonight. I didn't even have to remind you. I don't know what I'd do without your help." When you take notice, you'll see that these opportunities are around every corner.

Talk to your child.

For parents it's natural to try to protect kids from life's harms and upsets, but at what expense? The less you tell your child, the more serious he thinks his problems are. Kids suspect the worst if parents don't talk to them. The more open and honest you are with your child, the more trust he'll have in your relationship. Let him know that you're going to get through this together. Include him in as many family meetings and appointments with professionals as possible. Tell your child what to expect in the meetings and talk about them afterwards to get his opinion on how it went. Simply, Speak the unspoken to your child, and you will both benefit.

Encourage your child to talk.

Let him know that you're available to listen to him, you won't tell him how he should feel, and you promise not to make judgments about what he tells you. You might have to take the first step and model the type of discussions you'd like to have with him. If you're nervous, you can write down some notes beforehand to organize your thoughts. Share your own childhood experiences — times you might have felt bad or embarrassed about school. This lets him know that he's not alone. You know what it can be like. You DO know what he's going through. You'll have to say it often, just be sure to say it — "I'm here for you if you want to talk."

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Other Resources

Books

When Learning is Tough: Kids Talk About Learning Disabilities
www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/080758892X/schwabfoundation/
By Cynthia Roby