

## PARENTING THE CHILD WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

*Edward H. Jacobs, Ph.D.*

**Q:** My child has been diagnosed with a Nonverbal Learning Disability. What is it, and how can I and his school help him?

**A:** Nonverbal Learning Disability (NVLD) is a processing problem that is not as well understood or recognized as other kinds of processing problems. Children with NVLD typically have very good verbal intellectual abilities, so they speak well and appear intelligent, which they usually are, but their difficulties with academic and social success leave their parents and teachers puzzled and questioning the child's motivation, while the child is left feeling frustrated and defeated.

Their strong verbal abilities mask their underlying problems with processing nonverbal information: the information that we get from our visual and sensory-perceptual experiences and the organizational framework that we impose on what we experience, read, and write. Some examples might be helpful.

These children can often read a text very well, but find it difficult to articulate the main idea and how the different ideas, people, and events relate to each other. They might study for tests which they fail, because they lack an innate sense of what the most important things to study are and what is of secondary importance and should be studied only if there is time left after the major areas have been mastered. Their written work is often poorly organized with little flow from one topic to another, and their handwriting is often plagued by inconsistent sizing of letters and inconsistent spacing between letters and words, so it is often difficult to find where one word ends and another begins. These children might find it hard to follow directions in getting from one place to another and to master geography. They also find it difficult to mentally visualize information: to hold information in their heads as they work on it. Therefore, they might be unable to follow multiple-step directions that are told to them. They might appear to have an attention deficit whereas they actually can hold only a limited amount of information in their "mind's eye" so to speak. This is the reason most of these children have trouble doing math in their heads. Mental calculations require the ability to hold numbers in one's mind while one works on the numbers, maintaining place values while renaming and regrouping.

One of the primary causes of distress in the lives of these children is their social relationships. They find it hard to read social cues because of the need to quickly and automatically organize a great deal of information that is being presented simultaneously. If you think about it, when you are interacting with another person, you are filtering through an enormous amount of information every moment. You are processing what the person is saying, the

volume and tone of his voice, your history with that person, and the person's nonverbal behavior. This processing enables you to judge, without having to consciously think about it, whether the person means what he says, and if he is friendly or hostile. This continuous stream of information gives you feedback about your interaction as well, which you use to modify your behavior moment to moment, such as whether you should speak more loudly or softly, whether you are standing too close to the other person, and whether you are confusing, angering, or charming the other person.

It is easy to see, then, why children with NVLD have such difficulty making and keeping friends. They desperately want to have friends, but they don't seem to understand how to fit in or what to talk about. They find it hard to "get" jokes. They often can discuss topics in which they are interested with adults, who appreciate their good verbal abilities, but their interests often aren't shared by their peers. They often don't excel at sports, leaving them left out of an important aspect of social belonging and status.

Being bombarded with a lot of simultaneous stimulation which they cannot sort through, filter and prioritize, such as what happens during transitions times at home (such as when everyone is coming home from school or work, or during unstructured time at recess) can result in the "system" shutting down, causing frustration which in turn leads to withdrawal or tantrums. These children are then viewed as having emotional problems, which further distracts adults from attending to their processing difficulties.

Unfortunately, it is the strong verbal intelligence that these children have that often prevents them from being identified early. Since school-based learning is largely language-based, the intellectual strengths of these children are readily apparent, while their underlying disorganization is not recognized as a true processing problem. There are characteristics on psychological tests that help to identify these children, but many children do not neatly fit the diagnostic profile cleanly, so a diagnosis should never be ruled in or out solely on the basis of test scores. School districts too often place too much emphasis on the scores or the numbers in deciding whether or not to identify a child as being in need of services. These children, for example, usually perform relatively well on tasks that depend on language skills, and poorly on visual-spatial tasks. Schools, therefore, usually look for a very large discrepancy between the child's Verbal and Performance IQ scores, with very low scores evident on specific visual-spatial subtests. It is possible, however, for these children to use their significant verbal abilities to compensate for their weaknesses and do better than expected on some of these tasks, and not on others. So the tester might not have used

visual-spatial tasks that were sensitive to a particular child. There is no substitute for sound clinical judgment, in which the child is viewed as a whole person, not just a compilation of test scores.

Several things can be done to help the child with NVLD. They can learn to use their superior verbal skills to guide themselves through new learning tasks by using verbal self-guidance: talking themselves through tasks in a step-by-step manner. For example, when the child is learning a new mathematical operation, such as adding two two-digit numbers, he can practice saying to himself, first aloud and then silently, each step in the sequence. The sequence of steps can be written down and placed on his desk at school and at home to refer to whenever he is doing addition, until the procedure is more automatic.

The "rules" of social interaction, such as "Make eye contact and say 'Hello,'" "Tell your friend one interesting thing you did this week," "Wait until your friend finishes speaking before you respond," and "Don't stand too close to your friend," can be written down and verbally rehearsed before each planned social event. While this might seem artificial and forced, the child's self-confidence from this can grow and social interaction can become less painful.

Helping the child organize lengthy textual information is also possible by training him to first pre-read a text by scanning the headings and subheadings, then going back and reading the full text with questions in mind, such as "Who is the main character?" and "What is he trying to accomplish?" After reading through the text, the text can be reviewed with these questions in mind.

I evaluated one young woman with NVLD who had made it as far as college without being identified, on sheer persistence and intelligence. However, in college she found it impossible to keep up with all of her lecture classes because she was trying to write down every word that each professor said in every class. She had not developed the skill of listening for key words and writing down an outline of the lecture as she listened to it. It can help these students enormously if they are simply given outlines of the class material on which they can take their notes. This gives them an organizational framework in which to place the content of the lecture, and it gives them a visual stimulus to reinforce the auditory information to which they are being exposed. Tutoring these students in identifying main ideas and key words is also helpful.

So, I hope it is clear that NVLD is a real but invisible processing disorder, and that much can be done to help these children. The hardest part, though, is early and accurate identification and acceptance, so these children can enjoy successful learning experiences early in their education.

*Edward H. Jacobs, Ph.D. is a psychologist in practice in Londonderry, NH. He is a frequent contributor to the LDAM Journal and the author of two books: Fathering the ADHD Child: A Book for Fathers, Mothers, and Professionals, and ADHD: Helping Parents Help Their Children, both published by Jason Aronson, Inc.*