

# Carpe Diem – Seize the Day Blog

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For children with epilepsy, the epilepsy may not be their only challenge. There are conditions called co-morbidities that accompany epilepsy. One of those co-morbidities is the diagnosis of a learning difference. Children with a learning difference have emotional needs that we need to support. Those emotional needs may include anxiety and depression.

When children are diagnosed with a learning difference, we naturally worry about how it will affect their school performance. What we often do not think about, but should, is how having a learning disability may affect children emotionally. Not all kids with a learning disability become frustrated, sad, or anxious, but it is pretty common for children to go through at least some period of emotional struggle. It is not easy for children when they see themselves falling behind their peers at school. Even if they pretend that they do not notice or care, struggling in school can be a demoralizing experience. Here are some signs that kids might be struggling emotionally:

- Lowered self-esteem
- Increased anxiety, particularly in academic situations
- Increased sadness or irritability
- Acting out
- Physical symptoms like headaches or stomach aches
- Reduced motivation

Some of the signs, like crying or worrying, can be obvious, while others, like acting out, are more frequently misunderstood. Laura Phillips, PsyD, a neuropsychologist at the Child Mind Institute, explains the dynamic. “Sometimes kids would rather be the ‘bad’ kid than the ‘dumb’ kid, or they would rather be the class clown. They are either trying to divert attention away from their academic struggles or they are trying to have the ‘I don’t care’ attitude as a way of saving face.”

In addition to getting children help for a learning issue—strengthening skills and finding strategies that play to their strengths—parents should think about the emotional needs of a child. If you see signs that your child is struggling, try to understand what specifically is troubling him. Below are the three most common reasons why kids with a learning difference might feel bad, and what to do about them.

## **1. Kids think they are “dumb.”**

This is a particularly big one during the period before a child has received a diagnosis. Children often notice if they are not learning at the same pace as the other kids and can assume it is because they just are not smart. Unfortunately, kids can keep believing they are not smart even after they are diagnosed with a learning disability.

**What to do:**

Make sure your child understands what a learning difference is. “Kids might not know, but by definition a learning difference means that a student is of at least average intelligence,” explains Dr. Phillips. In fact, a learning difference is identified when an expert recognizes that a child is not performing up to her natural ability in a particular area. Hearing explicitly that a learning difference has nothing to do with intelligence can be very meaningful to kids.

Talk it through. Ideally you, your child, and whoever is working with your child should talk about the learning difference together. Sometimes parents think their child will not understand, but a learning expert can help you find developmentally appropriate language to use.

Think about the messages you are sending. Children are very sensitive to their parents’ emotions, and if they sense that you are uncomfortable with their diagnosis, or that you think that having a learning disability is a bad thing, they will probably feel the same way.

Examine your own feelings. Because learning disabilities in children can be genetic, sometimes seeing a child struggling can also bring back difficult memories for parents or make them feel guilty. You may want to schedule a separate appointment to discuss any questions or concerns you have with your child’s provider. The best way to help your child feel more positive is if you start feeling positive, too.

**2. Kids feel like they stick out in class.**

The last thing most kids want is to look different from their friends. So, when kids get pulled out of class for tutoring or called on by the teacher for something they are afraid they cannot deliver, they may feel embarrassed and singled out. These experiences day after day can damage a child’s self-esteem and make her dread going to school.

**What to do:**

Ask teachers to be sensitive to how kids are feeling. Dr. Phillips says that she sometimes collaborates with schools to help teachers understand how a particular student’s learning difference is impacting him emotionally. When a child is very anxious about reading, for example, she has advised teachers to wait for him to raise his hand and offer to read instead of calling on him blindly. If his teacher needs to assess his oral reading because it is part of the curriculum, it might be better to do that privately. Students and teachers can also work out a subtle signal the student can use when he needs help or feels himself getting too frustrated.

Single kids out for praise, too. Children who are struggling in school may feel like they are mostly getting negative attention. When teachers make a special effort to give kids positive attention for the things that they are doing right—even little things—it can improve their mood and confidence. Dr. Phillips notes this is also a powerful technique for teachers to use with a child who tends to act out to divert attention.

Find the right academic environment. Sometimes children feel like they stick out because they need more assistance than they are currently getting. Work with the school and your child’s provider to consider what his needs are and if they are being met. He may need more accommodations, a different kind of tutoring, or even a change of school. Dr. Phillips notes that

there are some specialized schools that offer remedial support in school as part of an individualized curriculum rather than making it a separate after-school activity. These schools may also be better prepared to support each child's specific social, emotional, and behavioral needs.

### **3. Kids are worn out.**

Unfortunately, learning differences in children often means that kids need to work harder than their peers. This might mean spending more time on homework, going to tutoring, and collaborating with an educational therapist. Spending so much time focusing on something that is challenging for them can leave kids feeling frustrated and resentful. It can also lead to waning motivation in school.

#### **What to do:**

Remember that success breeds success. It is important to set children up for success—not failure—as much as possible. Teachers, therapists, and parents should consciously set modest, achievable goals that children can work towards meeting. When a child sees proof that she is making progress she will be more motivated to continue putting forth that extra effort.

Find their talent. This is possibly the most important thing you can do for a child who has a learning difference. You do not need to find her “passion,” or the thing she will do for the rest of her life—most kids will not end up being professional athletes or ballet dancers—but every child has a talent. Find something that your child feels good about doing, and that gives her a sense of understanding and accomplishment and give her time to practice it. As her talent grows so will her confidence, self-esteem, and overall happiness.

If you feel that your child has an undiagnosed learning difference and needs more support at school, contact either Steve Hutton ([steve.hutton@epilepsy-ohio.org](mailto:steve.hutton@epilepsy-ohio.org)) or Karen Brown ([karen.brown@epilepsy-ohio.org](mailto:karen.brown@epilepsy-ohio.org)) for help. If your child does have a diagnosed learning difference and still needs added support at school, contact either Steve or Karen for assistance.

***Editor's Note: The Carpe Diem – Seize the Day Blog will be distributed and posted weekly.***  
Always remember – CARPE DIEM – SEIZE THE DAY!

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