

## WHAT IS A NONVERBAL LEARNING DISABILITY

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NLD is a neurological disorder which originates in the right hemisphere of the brain. Reception of nonverbal or performance-based information governed by this hemisphere is impaired in varying degrees, causing problems with visual-spatial, intuitive, organizational, evaluative, and holistic processing functions.

Kids with NLD are very verbal, and may not have academic problems until they get into the upper grades in school. Often their biggest problem is with social skills. NLD is very like Asperger's Syndrome. It may be that the diagnoses of Asperger's syndrome (AS) and NLD simply "provide different perspectives on a heterogeneous, yet overlapping, group of individuals sharing at least some common aspects." AS and NLD are generally thought to describe pretty much the same kind of disorder, but to differ in severity—with AS describing more severe symptoms.

The syndrome of Nonverbal Learning Disorders (NLD) consists of specific assets and deficits.

The assets include:

- Early speech and vocabulary development
- Remarkable rote memory skills
- Attention to detail
- Early development of reading skills and excellent spelling skills
- Eloquent verbal ability
- Strong auditory retention

The three categories of deficits are:

- **Motoric:** lack of coordination, problems with balance and graphomotor skills
- **Visual-spatial-organizational:** lack of image, poor visual recall, faulty spatial perception, and difficulty with spatial relations
- **Social:** inability to comprehend nonverbal communication, difficulty adjusting to transitions and novel situations, and deficits in social judgment. Unlike students with Asperger's Syndrome, students with NLD are generally aware of their social deficits.

People with NLD can be affected in varied levels of severity in each of the categories, so that each person with NLD presents a unique clinical, behavioral, and educational picture. People with NLD can be helped by many forms of therapy, but their world is filled with confusing sensory stimuli. For some, their physical endurance is challenged by generally low muscle tone. Some need support throughout life with cognitive and organizational skills, motor skill development, pragmatics and social skills.

Children with NLD have advanced verbal and auditory memory. Some are precocious readers with advanced vocabularies. Nevertheless, NLD is a problem of language. People with NLD have rote language skills but when it comes to functional daily use of language, they have difficulties with tone of voice, inference, written expression, facial expression, gestures, and other areas of pragmatic speech.



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People with NLD have difficulty understanding patterns and lining up columns of numbers. Spoken instructions can be troublesome due to difficulty picturing consecutive directions and poor visual memory. NLD can also affect coordination, causing clumsiness, poor balance and a tendency to fall. Many people with NLD have poor safety judgment. We are not sure what causes NLD, but we know that the earlier the intervention, the better the prognosis.

The symptoms of NLD include:

- Great vocabulary and verbal expression
- Excellent memory skills
- Attention to detail, but misses the big picture
- Trouble understanding reading
- Difficulty with math, especially word problems
- Poor abstract reasoning
- Physically awkward; poor coordination
- Messy and laborious handwriting
- Concrete thinking; taking things very literally
- Trouble with nonverbal communication, like body language, facial expression and tone of voice
- Poor social skills; difficulty making and keeping friends
- Fear of new situations
- Trouble adjusting to changes
- May be very naïve and lack common sense
- Anxiety, depression, low self-esteem
- May withdraw, becoming agoraphobic (abnormal fear of open spaces)
- Bilateral tactile-perceptual deficits and psychomotor coordination deficits
- Outstanding deficiencies in visual-spatial-organizational abilities
- Deficits in the areas of nonverbal problem solving, concept formation, hypothesis testing
- Difficulty dealing with negative feedback in novel or complex situations
- Difficulties in dealing with cause-effect relationships
- Difficulties in the appreciation of incongruities
- Well-developed rote verbal capacities and rote verbal memory skills
- Over-reliance on prosaic rote, and consequently inappropriate, behaviors in unfamiliar situations
- Relative deficiencies in mechanical arithmetic as compared to proficiencies in reading (word recognition) and spelling
- Rote and repetitive verbosity
- Content disorders of language
- Poor psycholinguistic pragmatics (cocktail party speech)
- Poor speech prosody
- Reliance on language for social relating, information gathering, and relief from



anxiety

- Misspelling almost exclusively of the phonetically accurate variety
- Significant deficits in social perception, social judgment, and social interaction skills
- Marked tendency for social withdrawal and isolation as age increases
- High risk for social-emotional disturbance if no appropriate intervention is undertaken

What are some tips for helping kids with NLD?

- Keep the environment predictable and familiar, and prepare your child for changes.
- Provide structure and routine.
- Prepare your child for changes, giving logical explanations.
- Pay attention to sensory input from the environment, like noise, temperature, smells, many people around, etc.
- Help your child learn coping skills for dealing with anxiety and sensory difficulties.
- Be logical, organized, clear, concise and concrete. Avoid jargon, double meanings, sarcasm, nicknames, and teasing.
- State your expectations clearly.
- Be very specific about cause and effect relationships.
- Work with your child's school to modify homework assignments, testing (time and content), grading, art and physical education.
- Have your child use the computer at school and at home for schoolwork.
- Help your child learn organizational and time management skills.
- Make use of your child's verbal skills to help with social interactions and non-verbal experiences. For example, giving a verbal explanation of visual material.
- Teach your child about non-verbal communication (facial expressions, gestures, etc.). Help them learn how to tell from others' reactions whether they are communicating well.
- Learn about social competence and how to teach it.
- Help your child out in group activities.
- Get your child into the therapies they need, such as: occupational and physical therapy, psychological, or speech and language (to address social issues).

How can people help kids with poor social skills?

According to Mel Levine, in a book chapter titled "Unpopular Children [2]" there are many ways parents can help kids with social skills problems. Here are some ways parents can help their kids:

- Steer your child toward a playmate they have something in common with and set up a play date. This is a way to get some social skills experience in a small, controlled, less-threatening way.
- See if you can find a small-group social skills training program in your school system, medical system, or community. This kind of program will probably not be available in smaller communities.
- Encourage your child develop interests that will build their self-esteem and help them relate to other kids. For example, if your child is interested in Pokémon, pursuing this interest may open social doors for them



# MILESTONES

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- with schoolmates.
- Talk to your child in private after you have gone with them to a group activity. You can discuss with them how they could improve the way they interact with other kids. For example, you might point out that other kids don't feel comfortable when your child stands so close to them. Help them practice the social skills you explain to them.
  - Bullying is unacceptable. Your child's school must make every effort to prevent it. If talking to your child's teachers and principal does not put an end to the victimization, ask your child's doctor to write a letter to the school, and pursue the issue up to higher channels in the school district if necessary.
  - These kids need as few handicaps as possible, so make sure your child is getting the counseling, therapies, and/or medication they need to treat any other problems or medical conditions they might have.
  - Reassure your child that you value them for who they are. It's a little tricky to help your child improve social skills, and at the same time nurture their confidence to hold on to their unique individuality.

Resources taken from:

- <http://www.med.umich.edu/1libr/yourchild/nld.htm>
- <http://www.nlda.org/whatis.asp>

