Definitions of learning difficulties vary. However, children are considered to have learning difficulties if their ability to learn is below what could be reasonably expected for their age. This broad definition reflects the range of possible contributing factors. A deficit in academic (e.g., limited cognitive development) or developmental skills (e.g., fine or gross motor skills) may be the basis for a child’s learning difficulty.

As definitions vary, so do estimates of prevalence. On average, 12–16% of children meet the criteria for having difficulties with learning (OECD, 1999) although estimates for individual classrooms can be as high as 30% (Watson & Boman, 2005).

Students with learning difficulties may have difficulties including:

- developmental delay (e.g., those who do not meet developmental milestones, such as learning to walk or talk);
- poor coordination (e.g., students who have poor fine motor skills);
- emotional difficulties (e.g., students who have experienced some form of trauma such as the death of a close relative);
- limited environmental experiences;
- lack of appropriate educational opportunities;
- interrupted schooling (e.g., through illness, or family or social circumstances); and
- health issues (e.g., students who require long-term hospital stays or whose treatment affect their learning) (Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2010).

The behaviour of these students is often characterised by:

- inactivity or inefficient learning;
- off-task and distracted behaviour; and
- difficulties in connecting prior knowledge and experiences with new learning (Watson & Boman, 2005).

These factors combine with learned helplessness to result in:

- poor self-esteem; and
- low academic performance expectations.

**TEACHING TIPS**

Supporting a student with learning difficulties is a complex task. No two students’ circumstances are alike and no two pathways to improvement are the same. Success in assisting a student to overcome a learning difficulty will be the culmination of many factors. Some are within the control of the teacher; some are not.
Following a basic problem-solving strategy can give the teacher a framework for action. A simple problem-solving cycle entails: (a) identifying the problem; (b) examining the facts of the case; (c) making a plan; (d) enacting the plan; (e) evaluating the results; and (f) if necessary, returning to an earlier stage in the cycle.

Therefore, the first step is to identify the problem and its contributing factors. A teacher can be informed by the child: the parents or caregivers; agencies external to the classroom, such as guidance officers; and the teacher’s own experience. For example, parents who have noticed that their child is not reading at the level they would expect may discuss this with the teacher, or the child may ask for assistance from the teacher or a classroom aide. The counsellor at the child’s school may have the child complete a reading comprehension test, such as the ACER Neale Analysis of Reading Ability or TORCH tests, to ascertain the child’s reading age, or to identify areas of weakness such as comprehension or vocabulary. To add to the challenge for the teacher, these information sources can sometimes be contradictory. For example, the parents or the child may be reluctant to acknowledge the problem when it is drawn to their attention, particularly if they are concerned that the child will stand out from his or her peers.

Once the learning difficulty has been identified, the same people can be involved in outlining a course of action. In schools, this is often written in the form of an Individual Education Plan (IEP). These plans guide the teacher in ways to accommodate or respond to the student’s learning needs (see e.g., Department of Education and Training, 2006). An IEP may specify ways that a teacher can respond to a student’s auditory processing difficulties; for example, by ensuring that, during group work, that student’s group works in an area with minimal external noise, or by giving all instructions in written as well as verbal form. While the plan is being implemented, regular communication among the stakeholders is necessary to monitor the student’s progress. Regularly evaluating the IEP will help to determine if changes need to be made for continued progress.

**FACTORS FOR TEACHERS TO NOTE**

Because a long-term approach is often needed to assist a student with a learning difficulty, the responsibility for a learner’s progress becomes a whole-school responsibility. In other words, all staff must keep up to date with a student’s special circumstances so that there is a coordinated effort toward redressing the learning problem and consistent expectations about achievement. A fragmented approach, teacher by teacher, year by year, will not usually benefit the student. Differences between high-school and primary-school structures and teaching approaches can also adversely affect the outcome of a whole-school approach. For example, it is sometimes easier for a student to "fall through the cracks" at high school as they move from teacher to teacher and from subject to subject, with no one taking responsibility for, or monitoring, the student’s overall school progress.

While every student with a learning difficulty will have a unique set of circumstances that will require a specific response, some broad actions can be implemented in the classroom and the school that will generally have a positive effect on the student’s learning. These include a strongly developed, caring ethos in which a student’s learning difficulties are acknowledged and accepted by the teacher and students. This provides a safe environment for all students. Many of the secondary factors that students with learning difficulties can face, such as ostracism and bullying, are limited or eliminated in a caring classroom environment, making learning progress considerably easier. The teacher is the central figure in developing this kind of classroom environment.

**REFERENCES**


**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

ANNETTE HILTON and GEOFF HILTON have PhDs in Education from The University of Queensland. Both have had long and significant careers as classroom teachers. Annette at the secondary school level and Geoff at the primary school level. Their contributions were written while they were teaching at Australian Catholic University in Melbourne. Both have since returned to the School of Education at The University of Queensland.