

SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

MANAGING YOUR CHILD'S BEHAVIOUR.

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Apart from trying to help their child through all the problems that go with the LD package, many parents are also faced with a daily assault of behaviors like anger, withdrawal, aggression and disobedience – behaviors that result from the confusion and frustration of having a learning disability. Nobody ever said that parenting was going to be easy, but raising an LD child can seem overwhelming.

LD children find it difficult to process certain types of information, and so learning seemingly natural, everyday skills and behaviours is easier said than done. But, there is no distinction when the foundations are laid. *All children* need to be taught what makes up appropriate and inappropriate behavior. *All children* model their own behavior on what they see their parents doing, the reactions of their parents in certain situations, the attitude of their parents towards others. *All children* need limits and rules to be established with clear consequences for breaking those rules.

When establishing your household rules, it is worth remembering that LD children want approval, success and achievement more than anything else. When faced with a task or situation which threatens these needs, he is likely to react negatively in order to cope. With this in mind, you can set him up for success and the positive self esteem that follows or be faced with failure and an onslaught of inappropriate behaviors.

Here are some suggestions that will help to minimize the behavior issues that are causing concern. The focus is on the preventative approach which is key to maintaining positive behaviors.

Laying the Foundations

- How he sees, hears and feels about his world will determine his reaction to it. If he is feeling in control and good about himself, he will react positively towards others and in certain situations. It is usually when he is feeling

frustrated, confused, insecure or his self esteem is threatened, that his reactions will be negative.

- It is important then that your goals are realistic and within his reach, that your requests are small and very specific and that he will succeed at what is required of him.
- We all thrive on success. It boosts our self esteem, fuels our enthusiasm and drives us to attempt things we might have hesitated at before. Your child is no exception. To feel secure enough and motivated to extend himself and try something a little more difficult each time, your child *must succeed* at whatever he attempts.
- Make sure he knows that it is also alright to fail sometimes – help him to understand that the only way he can develop a new skill is to go through a period of doing the task poorly, then gradually improving as he becomes more competent. When he feels secure in his environment, he will feel secure to try his best.
- Look for your child's strengths and make a point of emphasizing and encouraging them while playing down his weaknesses. He needs to be made aware of the things he *can* do because often he will be so overwhelmed by his struggles and difficulties, that "Nothing I do is right" becomes his theme song.
- Notice and acknowledge his efforts, no matter how small the steps of progress may be. Positive comments and praise will build him up while negative comments and criticism will break him down. You can never praise him enough.
- Don't make the mistake of comparing his abilities to those of others – his siblings or peers. If he feels that his efforts are never good enough, or that he never measures up to your expectations, he will give up trying to please you.
- Acceptable and appropriate behavior is developmental - it happens over time and is greatly influenced by parental support and guidance, peers, previous

experiences and the intervention techniques used. Don't expect changes overnight.

- Children react favourably in an environment that is happy and relaxed, where their opinions are valued and they are accepted as they are, for who they are.

Implementing the Change

- Behavior management or behavior modification is very effective in establishing guidelines for children with LD. It works by using positive reinforcement to encourage appropriate behaviors and by ignoring inappropriate ones.
- Acceptable, appropriate behavior must be *learnt* – and children learn from watching others, from realizing what kind of behavior gets the desired attention, from direct instruction and from lots of practice and reinforcement.
- Your child must understand what kind of behavior is inappropriate, what effects this behavior has on others around him, and what the reactions of others towards him will be as a consequence of his unacceptable behavior; for example, his friends will not include him in their games if he continues to disrupt them.
- Routine is important for all children, but for LD children, it is essential. Not only does it make your life a lot easier, but your child then knows what is expected of him and when, and this makes him feel secure.
- Involve your child when you are establishing rules and routines. Communicate your expectations – don't take it for granted that he knows what they are. Be receptive to his suggestions and opinions as well, and rather than being dictatorial and unbending, compromise wherever possible. He will be much more willing to follow rules that he has helped put together than those that have been thrust upon him.
- LD children are often very concrete and need to see or touch in order to understand. Once you have both agreed on a set of rules, write them down and place the list somewhere prominent, like on the mirror in his bedroom, or

on the refrigerator door. He will need lots of reminders on what the rules are, remind him regularly to consult the list.

- Instead of trying to change all his unacceptable behavior at the same time, work on one aspect only – for example, going to bed without making a fuss. Each time he goes calmly and quietly to bed, he might get to choose a story, or have extra cuddle time (positive reinforcement). Ignore the tantrums at bed time and try to remain as calm and patient as possible – sometimes a parent's reaction or attention becomes the reinforcement for these behaviors. Once this behavior is under control, move on to the next behavior change.
- To reduce the stress and eliminate the inappropriate behaviors, establish exactly what needs to be done to make bedtime a more pleasant experience for all, like:
 - setting a specific time for getting ready for bed (e.g. 8.30 pm) and for lights out (e.g. 9.00 pm) and keeping to this routine as far as possible;
 - giving enough warning before he must stop what he is doing;
 - being flexible on occasions and not interrupting favorite TV programmes or games midway;
 - anticipating his delaying tactics by guiding him through the process with questions:
 - Have you brushed your teeth?
 - Have you packed your school bag?
 - Are you in your pyjamas?
 - Are your dirty clothes in the laundry basket?
 - Would you like a glass of water?
 - Do you need to use the toilet?
 - Have you chosen a book for your story time?
 - pointing out how well he did and praising all his efforts;
 - making bed time a special bonding time by reading a bedtime story, discussing his day with him, cuddling him, tickling him and telling him how much you love him.

- Rewards should be immediate and consistent and need not be (in fact probably shouldn't be) financial or material like money or gifts. Praise and a feeling of achievement are often rewards in themselves (remember the needs – approval, success and achievement). Establish what your child will see as something really special and use these as rewards, like extra TV time, or extra play time, or baking, or an afternoon at the park. Extra privileges for special efforts usually go down well.
- Minor inappropriate behaviors (like temper tantrums) should be ignored – sometimes a parent's reaction or attention becomes the reinforcement for these behaviors. However, taking away privileges for more serious offences (like pinching his brother) often works quite well. *Never* withhold affection as a form of punishment.
- All children, whether LD or not and irrespective of age, should have responsibilities around the home – chores. Having LD is no excuse for not being accountable for the responsibilities that have been assigned to him, but his chores must be geared towards his abilities and success must be within his reach.
- Check your expectations – expect the best that he can produce, but perfection is not a requirement!
- Decide *together* with your child what tasks need doing and list them on a chart; for example, making his bed, feeding the dog, doing his homework, and so on. Every time a task is completed, he receives a sticker next to the task. When a certain number of stickers are reached, he receives a reward.
- *Tidy your room* may seem like a reasonable request for many children, but for your LD child this chore is huge (he's extremely disorganized), will take forever (he gets easily distracted) and you could both end up in tears. He is defeated before he even begins. Rather break the tasks up into smaller, more manageable chunks. Make a list of tasks that are necessary when tidying his room and as he completes each task, he can tick them off. For example:
 - Pack your books and magazines in the bookshelf.

- Pack your toys in the toy box.
- Put your dirty clothes in the laundry basket.
- Fold up your clean clothes and pack them in the cupboard.
- Take dirty glasses, mugs and plates to the kitchen and wash them.
- Throw the rubbish in the bin.
- Most children with learning disabilities need careful guidance and instruction in order to master certain skills independently. Always provide the initial assistance necessary and then gradually reduce the supports as the child makes progress
- And finally, end each day with praise. As you tuck your child in to bed and kiss him goodnight, reflect on all he's achieved that day and praise him. As Neil Simon, of Brighton Beach Memoirs fame says, *It's amazing how quickly you recover from misery when someone offers you ice cream.*

Occasionally, some children will continue to display ongoing behavioral difficulties and you may need to seek the advice and assistance of professionals. Remember that children are individuals who experience problems specific to their own situation, and while these suggestions might be helpful, they might not deal with specific difficulties your child has. For more individual advice and help with your child's particular problem, contact our Remedial Therapist.