

Tip Sheets

Nonverbal Learning Disorder



Nonverbal learning disorder (NLD) is a neurologically based developmental disability. Currently, there are no known causes. As a learning disorder, it often involves strong verbal skills that do not translate into abstract reasoning. NLD is

considered a syndrome, which means the disability is comprised of a cluster of skill deficits.

Children with NLD may be strong readers but not understand what they just read. They often have advanced verbal and auditory memory, though they struggle with language. Children with NLD have rote language skills but have difficulties with tone of voice, inference, written expression, facial expression, gestures, and other areas of pragmatic speech. Spoken instructions can be troublesome due to difficulty picturing consecutive directions and poor visual memory.

A child with NLD may experience:

- Physical clumsiness
- Social ineptness, especially intuitive social skills
- Difficulty in acquiring self-help skills
- Problems with adaptability
- Spatial and coordination problems

Prior to a child being diagnosed, a caregiver may often think “I shouldn’t have to tell you this!” when in fact, you do have to tell the child.

Four Main Areas of Dysfunction

1. **Motoric:** Lack of coordination, severe balance problems, and trouble with graphomotor skills
2. **Visual-Spatial-Organizational:** Lack of image, poor visual recall, faulty spatial perceptions, and problems with spatial relations
3. **Social:** Inability to comprehend nonverbal communication, difficulties adjusting to transitions and novel situations, and deficits in social judgment and social interaction
4. **Sensory:** Sensitivity in any of the modes (visual, auditory, tactile, taste, or olfactory)

Typical Behavioral Characteristics

- Children with NLD may stray from their groups and get lost easily.
- They may often spill things at meal time because of problems with motor coordination.
- They may have trouble dressing themselves.
- There may be problems with spatial skills that appear in a weak understanding of nonverbal information like pictures and cartoons, or nonverbal tasks like puzzles.

Typical Social Characteristics

- Difficulty interpreting/expressing social cues, facial expressions, and body language, which may lead to confusion and social rejection
- Difficulty with intuitive social skills, such as how to enter play groups or carry on conversations
- Challenges understanding figurative speech, idioms, sarcasm, and any nonliteral language

Assets for Children who have NLD

- Early speech and vocabulary development
- Remarkable rote memory skills
- Attention to detail
- Early development of reading skills
- Excellent spelling skills
- Verbal ability to express themselves eloquently
- Strong auditory retention

Inclusion Strategies

It is important for early care and education professional to understand what a nonverbal learning disability involves to builds acceptance and awareness. The following strategies will help in including children with NLD:

- Examine your sensory environment. Be aware that a child with NLD may have sensory processing difficulties.
- Use verbal descriptions and cues to try “telling” more than “showing.”
- Help the child socially with friendship groups and learning how to enter play successfully.
- Teach specific social skills like sharing.
- Teach what specific facial expressions can mean, like a frown or smile.
- If a child is struggling with expressive language skills, have him/her practice staying on topic and not interrupting.
- Set clear expectations so the child will not become frustrated or feel unsuccessful because they did not understand the instructions.
- Give step-by-step instructions for tasks or behaviors.
- Work with other therapists or professionals (with parental consent).

Additional Strategies

- Computer use for different learning activities
- Consistent Scheduling
- Logical explanations for change
- Peer mentoring
- Provide methods for coping with anxiety
- Provide methods for coping with sensory defensiveness
- Occupational and physical therapy
- Organizational skills coaching
- Speech and language therapy which addresses social cognition rather than articulation
- Time management coaching
- Verbal brainstorming
- Verbal explanation of visual material



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