

A Guide for Early Childhood Educators



How to Handle Hard-to-Handle Preschoolers

ADHD, Anger, Asperger Syndrome, Autism,
Bipolar Disorder, Bullying, Complaining,
Constant Chatter, Learning Disabilities



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Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *How to Handle Hard-to-Handle Preschoolers*.

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How to Handle Children With Learning Disabilities

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Today's child is tomorrow's future.

—Maryln Appelbaum

This topic has very special meaning for me because two close family members were both labeled with learning disabilities (LD). They are both adults now, and while they had many struggles they had to overcome as children, they are now both successful in their lives. I share this story at the beginning of this chapter because, even though having LD can be devastating, there is hope.

Individuals with LD have a neurological impairment that mixes up signals between the brain and the senses (Winebrenner, 2006). Children with LD may have an average or above-average intelligence. They can see and hear, but they do it differently. They have a neurological impairment in perception, conceptualization, language, memory, attention, or motor control. LD affects approximately 5 percent of children (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

Here is an exercise that I use at the beginning of every seminar I teach about LD. I have audience members pair up and say the alphabet backwards. Then I have them do it again, but with a twist. They have to say the alphabet backwards, and between each letter they must insert the name of a city, country, or state that does not begin with those two letters (e.g., “Z, California, Y”).

Audience members all flounder, grin sheepishly, and say that this task is very difficult. I then explain that this is how learning feels for children with LD. Learning something new is this difficult and frustrating for children with LD.

Children hear the sounds, but their brains may mix up the signals. The same is true for what they see. Here is an example of how differently children with LD can see. Imagine that your preschoolers with LD can read, and you have up on the board the sentence, “The train goes fast.” It may look to children with LD like, “The rain goes fast.” They may omit just one letter, totally changing the context. They may omit an entire word, and the sentence could read, “The goes fast.” Words may be blurred so that they are hard to read. Every time they read the same sentence or word, it can change again. If you think that sounds frustrating for you, just imagine how frustrating that is for children with LD.

Children with LD may also have problems with long-term memory. They may struggle to learn a concept and then later forget it. It is erased to the point that it does not seem like it was ever learned. If all of this appears frustrating to teachers, it is even more frustrating for children. Children struggle with feeling like they are dumb, even though they may actually be bright. As they get older, they often suffer from low self-esteem because of feeling like failures in school. Nearly 40 percent of children with LD drop out of school (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). They need strategies to help them feel successful and people to believe in them.

It is rare that a child in your early childhood program will already have been diagnosed with LD. Generally they are not diagnosed until they have been in elementary school, and even then, it may not occur until third or fourth grade (Appelbaum, 2008). However, there are signs that you may see in your preschoolers. Figure 3.1 lists common symptoms of LD in young children.

If you suspect a child has a learning difference, it is important that there is early diagnosis so that the child can begin getting help in addition to the strategies you can provide in the classroom.

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCEEDING WITH CHILDREN WITH LD

You can help children with LD. The first step is to recognize that these children are not lazy or unmotivated. They have a real disability. They may become unmotivated if they continue to fail. Your task is to help keep them motivated by finding strategies that work.

Figure 3.1 Symptoms of LD in Young Children

Symptoms of LD in Young Children
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Delay in expressive language• Problems comprehending verbal language• Difficulty following directions• Lack of interest in print materials like books• Problems or delays with fine and gross motor skills• Problems with writing• Inattentive• Easily distracted• Difficulty with transitions• Delays in emergent literacy skills• Letter reversals• Problems remembering new words• Forgetfulness of concepts previously learned

SOURCE: National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (2007).

Strategies for ADHD

Many of the strategies suggested in the previous chapter apply to children with LD. They, too, benefit from all of the organizational strategies as well as other strategies. Review the strategies for ADHD and use them with your children who have LD.

General Strategies

Individualize Instruction

Children are not in a “one-size-fits-all” category. Every child is different. Every child learns differently. It is important to individualize instruction. When you do something, and it does not work, do something else. Build a program on children’s individual strengths and needs, and it will be successful (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 2007).

I can still remember my first years teaching when I tried to teach all the children at the same time in the same way. They were frustrated, and so was I. It did not work. I had lots of classroom management problems. When I individualized instruction, I had an inclusive classroom with all children working at their own ability levels.

Literacy Strategies

Because reading is often a real problem for children with LD, it is important to have a bag of tricks to help children succeed.

Print-Rich Environment

All children benefit from a print-rich environment. Children with LD benefit even more. They become accustomed to print everywhere. Label, label, and label some more. Label cubbies with the word “Cubby.” Label the tables with the words “Art Table,” “Food Table,” etc. Label the shelves. Have little labels on shelves by materials. For example, on the language shelves have words in front of the objects such as “Pencils,” “Crayons,” “Paper,” “Chalkboard,” and “Chalk.”

Book Nook

Have a cozy book nook. It needs to be a warm and safe place so children want to go there and look at the books. You may add some pillows or a rocking chair. Have a bookshelf with age-appropriate books. All children enjoy picture books.

Story Time

Have regularly scheduled story times. Choose books that have fun stories for children. Make the stories enjoyable. I visited one classroom where the teacher was surrounded by children as she prepared to read a story. I saw two 3-year-olds who looked really mischievous, and I wondered how she would handle them. She captivated all the children, including those two boys, immediately with her opening statements. She said, “I have a really exciting story I am going to read you today, and it has a huge surprise in it. It is something that will amaze you.” She was very dramatic. She then started telling the children the story. She painted a word picture so that children could “see in their minds” what she was saying. When she saw that she might lose the children, she said very dramatically, “I wonder if the surprise is on the next page. . . . Let’s see.” The children acted like

they were hypnotized. They were all sitting, waiting for the “surprise.” My guess is that this teacher does something special for children every time she reads. The more children enjoy stories, the more they will enjoy picking up books and becoming familiar with print.

Child Authors

I go into a lot of preschools to observe and to make video clips for seminars. I have seen some amazing homemade books in book nooks. One book I recently saw was called “About Our Class.” The teacher asked the children to each draw what they liked best about the class. Afterward, the teacher asked each child to describe what they drew. They dictated as she wrote what they said on their artwork. All of the pages were then put together to make a book for the book nook.

That is just one example. I have seen books called “Our Favorite Pets” and “Our Favorite Foods.” The theme of favorites can be expanded to many areas in the classroom, even favorite books and favorite activities. Still another creative book is the “Book of Kindness.” Children do kind acts for other children or at home. Those acts of kindness are then drawn by the children, and a little note is added by the teacher. This is a great way to not only encourage a love for literacy to help children with LD and other children, but a wonderful way to teach them to do acts of kindness for others.

Story Boxes

This is another great way to make literacy come alive. Find a book that you and the children will enjoy. Read the story to yourself. Find all the objects to make the story come alive. For example, if you were reading Goldilocks and the Three Bears, you would have in a box a momma bear, a daddy bear, and a baby bear. You would also have objects or photos of objects like three beds. Tell the story to the children and as you read, get out the corresponding objects. When the story is finished, carefully put the objects back into the box. Tell the children they too can practice “reading” the story and taking out the objects. They love it. It’s adorable to watch them pretending to read the book and maneuvering the objects. This instills confidence in literacy skills—confidence that they will need to get them through tougher times.

Colored Transparencies

When children actually begin reading, a simple correction that helps many of them read better is placing colored transparent sheets of paper

over their reading material. Suddenly, words that were blurred and jumbled on white paper become clearer and easier to read. Different children need different colors of transparent sheets. Inexpensive sheets are often available at a scrapbooking store, and you can purchase a variety of colors to determine which colors work best for the children.

Show the different colors to children with LD who have problems reading. Place them on top of pages of white paper with black print. Ask the children to tell you which colors work best. Many children choose yellow, but other children may choose another color. Once you know the color that helps the child, you can recommend that parents buy glasses with lenses in that color. Transparent sheets may become blurry with hand and fingerprints. Lenses in the glasses can be more easily cleaned.

Recorded Books

Children listen to recorded books while looking at the pictures as they “read” the actual book. This is especially good for auditory learners. Discover the way each of your children learns best, and you will have gone a long way to helping them succeed.

Phonological Awareness and Phonemic Awareness

Phonological awareness is the awareness of the spoken language in all its forms, words, sentences, phrases, and phonemes (Kemp & Eaton, 2008). Phonemes are one component of phonological awareness, but separate because without the ability to understand the individual words, there can be no comprehension of phrases and sentences. Phonemic awareness is a subset of phonological awareness, and it is an important bridge to learning to read (Woods, 2003). It is the ability to identify and use individual units of sounds—phonemes. For example, the word “mat” has three individual sounds, “m,” “a,” and “t.” This is an area of weakness for many children with LD. The more they practice, the better they generally can perform.

Sandpaper Letters

Children trace a sandpaper letter with their fingers and as they trace the letter, they say the sound over and over again. For example, for the letter “m,” the children say, “mmmmmmmm,” “mmmmmmmm.” The children learn three sounds at a time. It is easier for children to begin with consonants. If you do not have sandpaper letters, simply draw a large letter, and have the children trace it over and over again saying the sound as they trace it.

Matching Sounds and Objects

Have a small basket that has in it objects that begin with two consonants the children have learned. Have the consonants on two small cards. Children put the objects that begin with the consonants underneath the corresponding letters. For example, under the “m” could be the following tiny plastic objects: mouse, money, mat, man. Under the “b” could be the following tiny objects: ball, bat, bone, banjo. You can do this same exercise having children match the sounds to picture cards rather than objects.

Once the objects are lined up under the letter cards, have children “read” the columns they have made: “mmmm,” “mmmmouse,” “mmmmoney,” “mmmmat,” “mmmmman.” They do the same with the objects that begin with “b.” It is self-correcting because they can hear the sounds and correct themselves when they make a mistake.

Finding Beginning Sounds

Teach children to look for things or people in the classroom that begin with the sounds they have learned. They may point to a child named “Brittany” for the “b” sound. They see a tiny bell on a shelf and point it out for the “b” sound.

Lining Up to Sounds

This is a fun game that children enjoy. Say, “Everyone whose name begins with ‘b’ line up at the door now.” Once those children have lined up, do the same with other letters until all the children have lined up at the door. In the beginning, you will have to help them to identify the first letter in their names.

Identifying Phonemes (Individual Sounds)

Tell the children two words that have a common phoneme. Have the children tell you what the sound is that both words have in common. For example, it can be “ball” and “basket.” The common sound they will say is “b.” It could even be an ending sound. For example, “mat” and “bat,” and the common ending sound is “t.”

Rhyming Skills

Children enjoy fun rhyming activities. They are a good way to help develop reading readiness (Woods, 2003). Teach them poems and songs that rhyme. Ask them to tell you all the words that rhyme with “mat,”

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such as “bat,” “hat,” “cat,” “fat,” “sat.” Tell them four words and ask them which one does not rhyme, such as “bat,” “cat,” “house,” “sat.”

Playing Word Games

Word games help children manipulate words and sounds (Woods, 2003). Have the children tell you two words they hear in the word “raincoat.” What two words do they hear in “hot dog”? Children love games like this.

Tactfulness

Be tactful. When children make an error involving literacy, instead of immediately correcting them, offer corrections in a more positive manner. Instead of saying, “That’s wrong, Jeff,” say, “Let me show you another way to do this.” These are children who easily feel like failures. The more they feel like they cannot succeed, the more they really cannot succeed. Your words can help ease the discomfort of making a mistake. Your voice tone is as important as your words. When they hear, “I believe in you—you can do this,” in your voice, it helps them to believe in themselves, too.

Fun and Interesting Books

Have you ever read a book that you just could not put down? You read and read and read, putting off doing other things. The book had you totally hooked. Finding a fascinating book is important for children with LD. Find out what interests them, and offer them books and articles to read in their area of interest.

Michael was a 5-year-old that I suspected might have LD. He hated books. He struggled with anything involving literacy and avoided the book nook and all reading and writing activities. I discovered that he was interested in fish. He had a fish tank at home and knew the names of and interesting details about each of the fish. I brought him a book filled with pictures of fish, and he liked it so much that he wanted me to read it to him over and over again. He often went into the book nook to look at the book himself and “pretend read.” I used that book as a jump-start to get him engaged in other themes the class was studying. When we were learning about Alaska, I gave him a book about the different types of fish that were native to Alaska. You can use this strategy with your children; find their hooks, their subjects of interest, and build on them.

Story boxes are a fun way to make books come to life. All you need is a shoebox, a storybook that the children love, and a few props that are

part of the story. As the children turn the pages in the book, they pull out the props and act out the story. This is a great activity for individual children and for small groups of children. For example, at one preschool I saw the book *Mrs. Wishy Washy*, by Joy Cowley, along with a small bowl for a tub, a tiny cow, duck, pig, and a little doll that represented the character of Mrs. Wishy Washy. All of these items were in a shoebox. The children had lots of fun with this story box. Find your own books that children love to read and create story boxes for them.

Writing

Children with LD often have trouble writing. They may make reversals and have difficulty making and forming letters.

Provide a Model

Children often reverse letters or numerals. One effective strategy is to have a model for them. Write letters on a piece of paper. Have arrows showing where to start. Children trace the letters over and over again until it became second nature to write the letters correctly.

Hidden Answers

There may be another reason for the reversals. I had a child in my school named Cory. He was a good-natured, short, and chubby kindergartner. Cory's dad was the president of a large bank and was used to telling people what to do and how to do it. He was frustrated with Cory's reversals, especially with the letters "b" and "d." I met with Cory's father at a teacher conference. He told me he had practiced and practiced with Cory, but Cory still kept making reversals. He said that Cory used to write with his left hand and that it took him months to get Cory to use his right hand. He was pleased that Cory was finally using his right hand after months of nagging.

The next day, I decided to do an experiment with Cory. I gave him a sheet of paper and told him to write some words that had the letters "b" and "d" sprinkled throughout. I told him that this time, I wanted him to write with his left hand. At first, he did not want to use his left hand. He told me that his dad told him not to use it. Finally, he agreed for that one time to use his left hand. Cory copied the words perfectly with no reversals at all. I called his dad and told him what happened, and he agreed that from that time on, Cory could use his left hand. Cory never had any further problems with reversals.

Prepare the Hand

One of the most important strategies for teaching children to write is to prepare the hand. Look at your hand right now as you are reading this. Pretend to hold a pencil. You are holding together your thumb, forefinger, and middle finger. Those are called “pincer fingers,” which are the fingers that grip a pencil or pen. The more you prepare children to use those fingers, the better they will be able to write.

An excellent exercise for the pincer fingers is “tonging.” You will need two same-sized small soup bowls, a pair of tongs, a sponge cut into small pieces, and a tray that holds all of the items. Fill the bowl on the left with the cut-up pieces of sponge. The bowl on the right is empty. Demonstrate slowly taking the tongs and moving one sponge at a time from the left bowl to the right bowl. When you are finished, turn the tray so that the full bowl is once again on the left. Make sure children always use the tongs from left to right, because you are indirectly training their eyes to go from left to right. That is the way children read a book and write—from left to right.

Once children have mastered tonging using large tongs, replace the tongs with tweezers and smaller objects. Children use the tweezers to move smaller objects from the bowl on the left to a bowl on the right.

The more those pincer fingers are developed, the better children will be able to write. It is similar to developing muscles when going to a gym. Several years ago, my son and daughter-in-law bought me a gym membership for my birthday. When I went to the gym, the trainers started me with very small weights. Gradually, over time, they gave me larger and larger weights. First, I had to learn how to handle the weights, how to hold them, and how to lift them. It is the same with teaching writing. The hand needs to be prepared before children can lift those pencils or pens and begin writing.

Tracing

When children are ready to start writing, have them trace the letter with their fingers. Have them practice making letters on a chalkboard, where the letters can be easily erased. When they have mastered the chalkboard, they are ready to write their letters on a sheet of paper.

Math Strategies

Math is a subject that children with LD may find a struggle. It is important to help children feel successful so that they develop self-confidence.

Making Math Concrete

Learning math involves taking an abstract concept and making it concrete in the minds of children. The best way to teach math is to use manipulatives that children can see, feel, and count. They need to be able to see what different numbers look like. That is why so many children count on their fingers. Those children are actually saying to you, “I learn best when I see, feel, and touch the numbers.” The more concretely you teach math, the more easily children will learn.

Counting as a Foundation

You can learn to read without memorizing the alphabet, but it is impossible to do any math operations without knowing how to count. Children need to learn one-to-one correspondence. They have to learn that what they are saying corresponds to objects. Ask them to hand you one of an object. Have them take two objects and place them somewhere in the room. Count aloud whenever possible in your classroom. Count children as they line up. Count desks in the room. Count the days of the week. Count the hands of how many children have pets at home. Have children join you as you count. The more they count, the better prepared they will be for mathematical operations.

Whole Body Math

Another way to teach children to count is to have them stand up and move. Have them all stand up in a circle. Have them take “one” step inside the circle. Then have them take “two” steps “outside” of the circle. They are able to experience with their entire bodies what the numbers mean. It is another way of taking the abstract quality of math and making it concrete. Extend this to having them stand in a straight line and take three steps forward, one step backward, and two steps forward. Keep going. They love movement, and this is a great way for them to experience counting. The more multisensory experiences you use, the better the children can learn (Winebrenner, 2006).

A CONCLUDING STORY

Many years ago I had a college professor who told us a story about his graduating class. He said that he was part of a large graduating class, but the person who got the highest grades in his class was a student with LD.