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Questions Parents and Educators Can Ask to Start Conversations About Using Terms Like *Learning Disabilities, Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, and Dysgraphia*

When parents and educators use the same terms to describe a child's challenges, it's easier for them to communicate and work together.

Parents and educators may have different opinions about specific terms like *dyslexia* or more general terms like *learning disabilities*. Understanding these terms and agreeing on which to use can help prevent confusion and conflict. It can also lead to a shared understanding of a child's needs.

Eleven diverse national organizations joined together to develop ideas for having this conversation. We hope this resource will add clarity so terminology doesn't get in the way. Then parents and educators can work together to provide the instruction, services, and support every child needs to succeed.

1. How is the term *specific learning disability* different from a term like *dyslexia*?

Specific learning disability (SLD) is a term used in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). It describes children who have a disability in reading, writing, or math.

Using the term SLD is important because it's the term used in IDEA. It needs to be used when identifying a student as eligible for special education services. Other terms may be used to describe a particular area of need such as dyslexia (a type of reading disorder), dyscalculia (a type of math disorder), and dysgraphia (a type of writing disorder).

In some schools, other terms may be used to make it clear where a student is struggling. For example, the school may refer to *word level deficit* or *decoding challenges*. Sometimes parents and educators use a combination of terms: "Hannah has dyslexia, a specific learning disability in reading, with primary challenges in decoding and auditory discrimination."

When parents and educators address this question together, they have an opportunity to better understand why, when, and how they will use the term specific learning disability and when they might also choose to add a more specific term, like dyslexia, in a student's evaluation and during the IEP process. It's also important to consider the views of the student and whether the terms used to describe his or her learning disability have any social, emotional, or self-advocacy impact.

SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITY

READING: dyslexia and/or specific reading comprehension deficit

WRITING: dysgraphia and/or disorder of written expression

MATH: dyscalculia

SLD may also co-occur with challenges with skill such as: organization, focus, listening comprehension, social skills, motor skills, or a combination of these.

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2. Can a school identify a specific learning disability and then use terms like *dyslexia*, *dyscalculia*, and *dysgraphia* in its evaluation?

Yes! School psychologists and other specialized instructional support personnel, in collaboration with parents and educators, use a [comprehensive evaluation](#). This has multiple assessment measures to identify [specific learning disabilities](#), which can include [dyslexia](#), [dysgraphia](#), and [dyscalculia](#), as well as other challenges.

Specific terms – such as dyslexia – can appropriately be used to capture and share information about the child's instructional and behavioral needs.

WHAT LAWS COVER STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES?

- IDEA
- Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act
- Americans with Disabilities Act



[Learn more about these laws.](#)

Some states have laws about dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia.



[Learn more about state laws.](#)

3. Can terms like *dyslexia*, *dyscalculia*, and *dysgraphia* be useful in a child's evaluation and IEP?

Yes! Specific terms can help describe a child's learning disability and his or her strengths and needs.

Educators and parents can discuss why terms like [dyslexia](#), [dyscalculia](#), and [dysgraphia](#) may help communicate a child's strengths and challenges. For those who are reluctant to use specific terms, it may help to explain how the child will still receive necessary services.



[Click here for a glossary of different terms you might hear.](#)

4. Are there legal reasons for a school to avoid terms like *dyslexia*, *dysgraphia*, or *dyscalculia*?

No! The [U.S. Department of Education](#) has made it clear that nothing prevents a school from using terms like *dyslexia*, *dysgraphia*, or *dyscalculia* in the [evaluation, eligibility determination](#), or [Individualized Education Program](#) (IEP) process. The department has encouraged states to review their policies, procedures, and practices to make sure they do not prohibit the use of these terms.

IDEA uses the term *specific learning disability* (SLD) to cover many learning issues that can co-exist. These include trouble with reading (such as dyslexia), writing (such as dysgraphia), and math (such as dyscalculia). According to current law, the term *specific learning disability* must be used when identifying a student as eligible for special education services.

However, it's permissible to also use more specific terms, like dyslexia, during the evaluation, eligibility determination, and IEP process, or when describing the student's particular area of need, such as: "Thomas has dyscalculia, a specific learning disability in the area of math. More specifically, he struggles with basic math facts and visual spatial representations of numbers."

Early conversations about these terms can help build strong and lasting partnerships between parents and educators. Being on the same page about what is [allowed by law](#) can add clarity to these conversations.

5. How can using specific terms like *dyslexia*, *dyscalculia*, and *dysgraphia* impact the interventions selected for a child?

IDEA requires that interventions be evidence-based and address the child's individual needs. When a student has been identified with a particular challenge—such as a specific learning disability in reading, like dyslexia—this information helps the IEP team choose which interventions to try. But there are other considerations as well. The IEP team should analyze which areas a child struggles with as well as identifying where he or she has strengths. In some cases, IEP teams will include specific instructional strategies or methods within the IEP.

It's important for all educators, not just special educators, to know about instructional strategies that support students with learning disabilities."

Most students with specific learning disabilities spend the majority of their day in the general education classroom. Being specific about what a child is struggling with is an important step in making sure the interventions – whether provided through general or special education – will meet the child's needs. It's important for *all* educators, not just special educators, to know about instructional strategies that support students with learning disabilities.