

## Understanding Learning Disabilities and How to Get Help

*Sruli struggled in school since first grade. He was always frustrated and never seemed happy. His older brother seemed to shine but Sruli was never a match, academically. Sruli, however did excel in sports and was great with his hands. These skills did not prove to be useful as he grew older through middle school and he, once again became very frustrated. His parents hired tutors but nothing seemed to help Sruli. The school finally recommended that he have a psycho-educational evaluation. They took him to the nearest public school where they were told that they would have to go through a formal process called an IEP Meeting to determine whether or not Sruli had a learning disability. If he had a learning disability then he would be entitled to special educational services.*

*A meeting was scheduled called an Initial meeting where Sruli's teachers presented current documentation of his present levels of performance and scores on standardized tests. After hearing reports from the teachers the team known as the Child Study Team determined which assessments to order.*

*At the initial meeting the team decided to order a cognitive assessment along with an educational assessment and a classroom observation. It was explained to Sruli's parents that in order to determine whether or not he had a learning disability, they would have to compare the scores from his cognitive assessment and his educational assessment to see if there was a significant discrepancy between the two. If there was a significant discrepancy then a disability would be determined.*

*After the assessments were completed an Evaluation meeting was held to review the assessments. The cognitive assessment showed that Sruli had a full scale IQ of 118 which placed him in the High Average range of intellectual Functioning. His educational assessment on the other hand yielded scores that fell mostly in the 80's and 90's range. This was enough of a discrepancy to indicate that Sruli indeed had a learning disability in the areas of reading comprehension and mathematics reasoning.*

The above case is not always how it works. There are usually complications and frustrations along the way. The process can be a slow one and parents often will feel that no one really understands their child or takes their child's best interests in mind. Sometimes, parents avoid the frustration of working with the public schools by hiring a private psychologist to conduct the evaluation. Although it may cost more, the chances are, the evaluation will be more comprehensive and the process will not be as drawn out. Parents should familiarize themselves with the process by speaking with those involved in special education to determine the most appropriate course of action for their child. There are some common questions that people ask me as a school psychologist that I would like to address.

One question that I am often asked is what I think about the ADD diagnosis. ADD or Attention Deficit Disorder is the diagnosis used to describe an individual with symptoms

of severe inattention that are sometimes accompanied with hyperactivity and impulsivity. When hyperactivity is included the diagnosis is referred to ADHD. Children with ADD have difficulty sustaining attention in tasks or play activities, do not seem to listen when spoken to directly, oftentimes do not follow through on instructions, have difficulty organizing tasks and activities, and are often distracted by extraneous stimuli among other things.

ADD and ADHD are considered learning disabilities. They are also the most commonly misdiagnosed disabilities, and for good, mostly well intentioned reasons. The trouble I have with the diagnosis is that the proper channels for diagnosing ADD are rarely taken.

Consider the following scenario: *Yossi can not seem to pay attention in class. He is off task and his teacher tells the principal that there is something wrong with this child and that he can not teach him unless they do something to calm him down. The principal holds a meeting with the parent. The parent calls the pediatrician who immediately suggests that they start a trial of a stimulant medication such as Ritalin or Adderal.* What is missing in this scenario is an accurate diagnosis. Without rating scales, a detailed history and observations made by competent mental health professionals, there is the potential of misdiagnosing a child. The results could be devastating if the child is then put on medication for an inaccurate diagnosis.

At a recent workshop that I gave to Rebe'eim, I told over what I felt about ADD and how I felt too many kids were being diagnosed with it improperly. I suggested that we must understand the motivations of inattentiveness. When a child comes to school in the morning and does not seem to be paying attention, what could be the underlying cause of this inattention? Is it biological? Did he have too much sugar in his cereal? Does his father have a bad case of ADD too? Or, could it be that something happened at home prior to his arrival at school. He forgot to bring something important and he's upset that he forgot it. He didn't get enough sleep the night before. There could be a multitude of reasons to explain inattention. Children who live in families where there is discord typically will have difficulty concentrating on their work in school because they are worried about what is happening at home.

So it could very well be that it is not a problem with inattentiveness. The problem is rather that they are attending too much to something other than the task at hand. That in no way, shape or form is anything similar to ADD! It is more likely that the child is 'hyper-attending' to some detail of his life and missing out on the current task that he is being presented in class. This is more symptomatic of an obsessive individual than an individual with attention deficits.

How can parents access services through the public school system? Baltimore City and Baltimore County have different approaches but it is important for parents to be proactive and remain proactive and patient throughout the process. Firstly, the parents must go to their zoned public school and request to meet with the head of the Special Education Team. In Baltimore City, that individual is known as the IEP Instructional Associate. When meeting with that person, parents should have a written and signed request asking

for an Initial meeting to be held. It is important to date the request so that proper timelines are upheld by the school. The individual should then give you a date as to when that meeting will be held. You have the right to request a convenient time for your meeting, but there is no guarantee that the school will be able to honor that request.