

Advocating for Children with Learning Disorders in a Socially Responsible Manner: Helping
Parents and Schools Find Common Ground

Concerned parents, pediatricians, and other mental health providers often contact psychologists who have expertise in learning disorders with questions about whether a local school system is providing adequate services for specific children. This generally happens when it is unclear whether the child's best interests and legal entitlements are being served. Twenty years of clinical practice has convinced me that responding to these questions appropriately is not a simple matter. It is clear that psychologists have a primary responsibility to make suggestions that are in the best interests of their clients. However, the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association (1992), to which all members are required to adhere, specifically state that psychologists should consider broader questions of responsibility to the communities in which they work and live, as well as the advancement of human welfare as a whole. Thus, in order to practice in a truly ethical manner, recommendations for a particular child must be made in a context that considers the impact on other children with learning disorders, as well as the student population as a whole. Questions of justice and equity for every child must be kept in mind at all times. Arriving at a balanced position, in which the primary duty to a client is served, while still maintaining a sense of responsibility to the larger community, must remain the goal.

The purpose of this essay is (a) to describe the current environment in which psychologists advocating for children with learning disorders find themselves, (b) to assess the implications of the legal mandates and certain commonly used educational strategies (such as the inclusion movement), and (c) to consider how these factors affect clinical practice on a day-to-day basis. Specific strategies that can be helpful to individual students and also enrich the learning environment for the student population as a whole will be described.

Changing Social and Political Forces Impacting Education in the United States

Psychologists who specialize in working with children with learning disorders and their families today must function in a rapidly changing environment. Developing a solid understanding of the complex rationales behind current practices, as well as an appreciation of the issues which remain unresolved, is essential for helping children and their families effectively navigate the complicated maze of special education services in the United States today.

Historical Perspectives

The numbers of children served by the special education departments in their communities grew dramatically after the passage of the Education of All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 (later renamed the Individual with Disabilities Education Act). This groundbreaking law mandated that each state provide “free and appropriate public education” for all children regardless of their disabilities in the “least restrictive setting” possible according to an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The federal government later extended this mandate to preschoolers and attempted to tie the goals for special education more closely to those of regular education. Each state maintains some discretion about the criteria used to determine