LEARNING DISORDERS IN GIRLS

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Learning disorders are among the most common of all childhood neurodevelopmental disorders with an estimated prevalence of between 3% and 10 percent of the school-aged population (American Psychiatric Association 2000). Estimates of prevalence vary across studies, however, with rates as high as 20% reported by some (e.g., Smith, 1998). In addition to their relative frequency, these disorders are of clinical and research importance because of their potentially negative impact on numerous other domains of functioning including social, emotional, and vocational outcomes (for a review see Willcutt & Pennington, 2000). As in many areas of developmental psychopathology, much of what is known about learning disorders is based on samples made up primarily of affected boys. This disproportionate overrepresentation of boys in many research samples has important consequences for our understanding of the nature of learning disorders, associated conditions, and effective interventions for girls. This chapter focuses on girls with LD and reviews the reasons why girls are typically underrepresented in most LD samples. The potential implications of this phenomenon as well as research focusing on girls with learning disorders are also reviewed.

Much of this discussion will focus on reading disorder (RD), a specific type of learning disorder. This is because approximately 80% of children with LD have primary difficulties in the area of reading either in isolation or in combination with difficulties in other academic areas (Mash & Wolfe, 2002). Consequently, the majority of research and virtually all of the large-scale, epidemiological research studies have focused on children with RD or on undifferentiated learning disordered groups of which the most are children who have RD. When a particular study speaks to
other types of learning disorder, this will be indicated in the discussion below.

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Diagnostic Criteria and Issues of Definition

The task of defining and establishing diagnostic criteria for LD has a long and contentious history and remains an area of considerable debate. A central feature of most definitions is the notion of unexpected academic underachievement in one or more areas. The underachievement is most often attributed to intrinsic, neurobiologically based, learner characteristics. One often-cited definition of LD in the United States is that of the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD, 1994). This definition states that:

> Learning disabilities is a general term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual, presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction, and may occur across the life span. Problems in self-regulatory behaviors, social perception, and social interaction may exist with learning disabilities but do not by themselves constitute a learning disability. Although learning disabilities may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (for example, sensory impairment, mental retardation, social and emotional disturbance) or with environmental influences (such as cultural differences, insufficient/inappropriate instruction, psychogenic factors), it is not the result of these conditions or influences. [pp. 65–66]

Another frequently used definition, especially in clinical settings, is the **DSM-IV-TR** definition (APA, 2000) which includes three specific types of learning disorder based on the specific academic skill area affected including reading disorder, mathematics disorder, and disorder of written expression. The main features of the **DSM-IV-TR** diagnostic criteria are listed as follows:

- Achievement in the specific academic area (reading, mathematics, writing), as measured by individually administered standardized tests, is substantially below that expected for the person’s chronological age, measured intelligence, and age-appropriate education.
- The disturbance in criterion A significantly interferes with academic achievement or activities of daily living that require the ability.
- If a sensory deficit is present, the difficulties in achievement are in excess of those associated with the deficit.

Despite the popularity and wide acceptance of the definitions outlined above, the set of diagnostic criteria is far from universal. An ongoing area of debate, for example, involves the use of ability (i.e., IQ) scores as a predictor