The scope of research on learning disabilities has broadened over the past 15 years to include the examination of psychosocial characteristics of individuals with learning disabilities. This attention to the social characteristics of students whose presenting problem is presumably in the academic domain is not surprising. It is now generally accepted that students' self-perceptions, the quality and quantity of their social experiences, and other psychosocial concerns in some way may be significant among the complex set of factors that are involved in the manifestation of a learning disability.

How they are significant has been a matter of conjecture. Does the underlying disability manifest itself in the social realm as well as in the students' academic performance? Alternatively, are psychosocial problems likely to be characteristic of any student with learning difficulties, not just of those who have been identified as learning disabled? Or do these characteristics in some way cause the learning disability, or at least increase the likelihood that individuals will be considered to be learning disabled?

Research is just beginning to sort out these different possibilities. Nonetheless, at this point a review of research on psychosocial characteristics of students with learning disabilities does allow one to draw two broad conclusions. First, as a group, these individuals are more likely than nondisabled students to have what most would consider to be less than optimal psychosocial characteristics. But second, not all of the individuals with learning disabilities, perhaps not even the majority, actually develop these problems.

As a result of the increasing acknowledgment of the heterogeneity of the category of learning disabilities, investigations are starting to examine which learning disabled students may be at greatest risk for psychosocial problems. Because these studies subdivide this population in different ways—by sex, by behavioral subgroup, by educational placement, for instance—few studies are cumulative, and so at this point conclusions are at best tenuous. Nevertheless, these studies provide some preliminary
suggestions of which learning disabled students may be most likely to develop problems in the psychosocial domain.

This chapter reviews research on four interrelated areas. One important indicator of the quality of a social environment is the degree to which one is accepted or rejected by one’s peers. Accordingly, the chapter begins with an examination of research on learning disabled students’ social status. To provide a more complete view of these students’ social world, the next section reviews studies focusing on their behavior, as indicated both through actual observations and through assessments made by teachers and parents. Studies that examine different areas of competence that may contribute to behavioral and social status differences are examined next. Finally, studies of the self-perceptions of students with learning disabilities are reviewed to examine these students’ assessments of their academic and social competence as well as their general self-esteem. Because most research on these topics has been aimed at delineating ways in which learning disabled students, as a group, tend to differ from nondisabled students, this chapter necessarily concentrates on these findings. However, whenever possible, findings indicating which students within the learning disabled population are most at risk will be described.

Peer Attitudes

One way to estimate the social climate experienced by learning disabled students is to evaluate whether they are liked by classmates as much as students without disabilities, or are disproportionately ignored or rejected. This issue has been studied by using sociometric measures, a technique developed more than 50 years ago (Moreno, 1934), which, in essence, simply asks students about their views of their peers. There are two major sociometric techniques, both of which have been used in studies with learning disabled students. In the first, students are asked to nominate classmates whom they feel exhibit certain specified characteristics. For instance, students may be asked to name their three best friends. Some studies attempt to identify the status of students in a less direct way, by asking, for example, which students the respondents would like to invite to their birthday party, or which student would make a good class president. Often, negative nominations are solicited as well; for instance, students may be asked to name three classmates they do not like.

By examining the pattern of nominations received by individual students, it is possible to get some idea of their status within their classroom. Researchers have used the results of nomination sociometrics in different ways, some adding positive and negative nominations together to derive a composite score, others using both measures to develop discrete categories indicating more specifically classmates’ level of regard. These typically include the category of popular or star, made up of children who