Teenage Dyslexia: Stürm und Drang

Florence Wexler Vigilante, D.S.W., and Elizabeth Dane, D.S.W.

ABSTRACT: Adolescence, a time of emotional risk for all children, is especially difficult for children with learning disabilities. Academic, social and psychological problems frequently result in extended dependency and derivative complications. Helping adolescents with learning disabilities achieve social and academic success and psychological well being are important goals of treatment. This paper addresses the special problems youngsters with learning disabilities face during adolescence. Professional interventions are suggested.

While adolescence is a time of emotional risk for all children, for children with learning disabilities this phase is particularly difficult to manage. Maturational lag causes academic, social and psychological problems resulting in extended dependency and derivative complications. How can we help adolescents with learning disabilities achieve social and academic success, psychological well being, and appropriate autonomy, as they try to adequately compensate for developmental deficits? This paper addresses the special problems youngsters with learning disabilities face during adolescence. Some professional interventions are discussed in relation to a specific case situation.

Stages of growth mark progression through adolescence when dramatic physical changes, accompanied by equally dramatic mood swings can create a terrifying time for teenagers (Mishne, 1986). The rapid rush of new emotions blocks the capacity to differentiate among the wide range of feelings they are experiencing. Sexual feelings, hunger, anger, pain and sadness may feel quite similar. This difficulty in differentiating feelings can precipitate severe anxiety. Adolescents encounter many additional challenges. Biological changes,

The authors are professors, Hunter College School of Social Work. Address correspondence to Dr. Vigilante at the school, 129 E. 79 Street, New York, N.Y. 10021.
take place during periods of transition from elementary school to middle school to high school; from a stable and predictable environment (one teacher and one group of classmates in each grade) to different teachers and different classmates every hour. To the confusion of inner disorganization, environmental disorganization is added. These conditions are significantly exacerbated by the perceptual difficulties of youngsters with learning disabilities.

Adolescents with learning disabilities are likely to experience developmental changes as extreme interpersonal stress. The great concern about body image, attractiveness, imagined and real views which others hold of him/her, often lead to depression which may precipitate desperate entry into drugs, alcohol, delinquency or pregnancy. Academic struggles can isolate the adolescent with a learning disability from his/her peers who might otherwise help compensate for social and emotional failures. Chronic depression, high anxiety, and panic reactions are common emotional states experienced by adolescents with learning disabilities. (Cohen 1986; Vigilante 1990). Cohen (1986) has suggested that the inability to moderate anxiety about learning may be considered a developmental deficit. Universally, the youngsters he tested reported feelings of being damaged, dumb, inadequate and vulnerable. Customary shifts in expectations of behavior for adolescents may be experienced by them as subtle, sometimes devastating, rites of passage. Academic demands are greater; the message “now we are really serious” is communicated; what was once mischievous behavior can now have legal implications. Standards for social, personal, athletic or artistic success are on an adult level. While new and different behaviors are expected these are not always clearly communicated or perceived. Mastery of former social cues is not always reliable as new social demands are made. Many adult roles need to be negotiated while multiple and often conflicting expectations of behavior can be especially overwhelming to the teenager with a learning disability. Moreover, some adults, threatened by teenage sexuality, sexual opportunities and lack of control, react punitively to them. There are often strong moralistic and personally judgmental overtones in the not unusual escalating negative interactions between teenagers and parents, teachers and others. (Dane, 1990)

Separation, the emblematic experience of the teenage years, is very often a more complex problem for adolescents with learning disabilities. Because of the uneven maturation of specific ego functions learning disabled adolescents usually have considerable difficulty in