

My Child is Odd

The child may act the class clown. The child may prefer to hang out with the adults. The child likely uses phrases, innuendo, jokes or sarcasm heard from others, but uses them inappropriately, at the wrong time, with the wrong persons. The child has a poor sense of boundaries, will interrupt, walk in on others or take or use things without asking. The child may have few friends and those the child does have are similar in nature. The child may be frequently scolded or punished. The child struggles at school and may be bullied. This child likely has a learning disability affecting social skills.

Just as there are learning disabilities that interfere with academic performance, there are learning disabilities that interfere with acquiring and utilizing social behaviour that enable us to get along well and fit in with others.

Children with learning disabilities affecting social skills have difficulty reading the social cues of others. They may not recognize emotional facial expressions or body language that gives clues to guide social behaviour. As such a child with this learning disability may not appreciate when they have insulted, upset or frustrated another person. If they cannot recognize the facial expression, then they are at a loss for modulating their own behaviour in response. Hence they may carry on with offensive or inappropriate behaviour, not recognizing their impact. As such, they may be considered rude, offensive or odd.

Further, not only does the child have difficulty reading the social cues of others, the child likely has difficulty viewing his or her own behaviour accurately. Hence just as they cannot read the reactions of others, they have difficulty gauging their own behaviour. When confronted on their behaviour, they are likely to blame the other person as the source of conflict or upset.

This kind of learning disability does not have to be severe to handicap a child. Even minor problems with social skills are enough to set them apart from their peers and undermine relationships. It is not that they are poorly behaved per se, but that their behaviour and social interactions, the result of their problem causes them to seem odd or out of place. These kids don't seem to fit in.

The diagnosis of a learning disability affecting social skills is best made by a psychologist, who at the same time would likely test for other academic learning disabilities as these issues often go hand in hand. Just as children require special methods of instruction to overcome academic learning disabilities, so too do they need a special approach to manage the impact of a learning disability affecting social skills.

In normal social situations, we take turns talking and let the other person finish what they have to say. When relating to a child with this learning disability, we may have to interrupt them if their conversation is inappropriate. The key though is not to demean or punish, but to directly inform that what is being said is inappropriate and then, importantly, redirect the child to appropriate conversation. Further, as these children are likely to copy or imitate the social behaviour of those around them, but apply those behaviours inappropriately, then those around the child must be aware of their own behaviour as a role model to the child. This may require a change in behaviour for parents and siblings as they learn to understand and manage the child's learning disability. A family meeting with the psychologist or a social worker to explain the disorder and required changes can help family members adjust. This in turn will benefit the child with the problem. More specific interventions can include special classes to address the child's ability to read the social cues of others and modulate their own behaviour in response.