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FAMILY STABILITY AND MOTHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF ELEMENTARY LEARNING DISABLED CHILDREN: IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELLING¹

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Abstract

Sixty-two learning disabled (LD) and 69 normally achieving (NA) grade three children from 11 urban middle class elementary public schools were studied. The LD children were of average intellectual ability but receiving part-time remedial assistance for academic deficits, usually in the area of reading. Age, education, occupations, and income of parents, along with mother's current marital status and parental living arrangements were investigated. In addition, mother's perceptions of ability and achievement expectations with respect to their children's school performance were studied. The results showed that general demographic factors did not differentiate between the LD and NA children. However, significantly more LD than NA children came from homes which had experienced parental separation. It was also found that LD mothers had significantly lower perceptions of their children's academic abilities and lower expectations for future success than NA mothers. The findings are discussed in terms of the relationship between family stability and learning disabilities, along with the need for parent counselling to facilitate more positive perceptions and expectations, and improved achievement in school for LD children.

Résumé

Cette étude porte sur 62 enfants présentant des difficultés d'apprentissage (LD) et sur 69 autres qui réussissent normalement (NA). Ils proviennent de 11 écoles élémentaires urbaines et de niveau socio-économique moyen. Les enfants du groupe LD présentent des habiletés intellectuelles les situant dans la moyenne et reçoivent une aide clinique en vue de remédier à leurs carences académiques, notamment en lecture. On a tenu compte de l'âge, du niveau d'éducation, de la profession et du revenu des parents de même que du statut marital de la mère et des modalités de vie des parents. On a aussi étudié les perceptions qu'a la mère du niveau d'habileté de son enfant ainsi que ses attentes quant au rendement et à la réussite scolaire de celui-ci. Les résultats démontrent que les facteurs démographiques ne contribuent pas à différencier les enfants du groupe LD de ceux du groupe NA. Toutefois, un plus grand nombre d'enfants du groupe LD que du groupe NA proviennent de foyers séparés. Les mères des enfants du groupe LD ont des perceptions moins positives des habiletés académiques de leur enfant de même que des attentes moins élevées quant à son succès éventuel. La discussion des résultats se situe dans le contexte de la relation entre la stabilité de la famille et les difficultés d'apprentissage; elle souligne aussi la nécessité de counselling pour améliorer les perceptions et les attentes des parents ainsi que le rendement scolaire des enfants du groupe LD.

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Learning disabilities have been widely studied during the last decade, as educators have attempted to understand the learning problems of children who persistently achieve below their potential intellectual ability. Although agreement over what constitutes a learning disability is lacking (Chapman,

Boersma & Janzen, 1979; Shepard, 1980), researchers have nevertheless attempted to provide information on various neurological, psychological and cognitive characteristics of learning disabled (LD) children. More recently, attention has also been drawn to affective and social factors related to learning disabilities (Bryan & Pearl, 1979; Chapman & Boersma, 1979). Compared to these areas of concern, however, relatively little empirical research has been reported on the influence of family variables on learning disabilities. Yet, it is widely accepted that family background, child-rearing styles, and parental attitudes affect achievement in school (Bronfenbrenner, 1969, Smart & Smart, 1980). Indeed, parent-family variables may be a significant factor when considering the cause or maintenance of learning disabilities, and the effectiveness of remedial programs. As such, they deserve greater attention than they have previously received so that our understanding of the social-emotional aspects of learning disabilities may be broadened.

One such important factor is family stability. Families who have experienced separation and/or divorce are a significant and rapidly growing phenomenon in North America (Bain, 1980). Dacey (1979), for example, notes that in the United States 18% of all children live with one parent. For Canada, 1976 census data indicate that at least 10% of all children are from single parent families (Statistics Canada, 1978). Substantially more families have experienced separation and remarriage.

Father absence has been shown to have adverse effects on children's cognitive development (Shinn, 1978). Indeed, some researchers have found that parental divorce or separation has more damaging cognitive effects than parental death (e.g., Ferri, 1976; Santrock, 1972). Other studies have suggested that home conflict or changes in family composition are related to learning disabilities (Abrams & Kaslow, 1977; Glaser, 1974). Koppitz (1971), for example, interviewed parents of 177 LD children and reported that 37% of the families were unstable. Wunderlich (1972) suggests that the absence of one parent, more likely the father, could be related to the development of learning disabilities in children. And Friedman and Meltzer (1973) claim that reading disorders may arise from children's separation from a parent at the time of school entry.

In view of the tentative nature of research on family stability and learning disabilities,

further studies in the area are clearly warranted. This is especially true when one considers the impact that parental relationships appear to have on cognitive and affective development.

In addition to family stability, the emotional climate of the home as conveyed through parental attitudes and perceptions, also plays an important role in learning (Christopher, 1967; Hilliard & Roth, 1969; Walters & Stinnett, 1971). Of particular interest here are parental perceptions of ability and expectations regarding future academic achievement.

Although a considerable number of studies have examined teacher expectation effects (Braun, 1976; Dusek, 1975), few have studied the influence of parental expectations on children's learning. If teachers' expectations influence achievement through differential teacher-student interactions, as the literature suggests (Cooper & Good, 1977), then it seems logical that parental expectations will also affect school performance (Brophy, 1977). In line with this prediction, Entwisle and Hayduk (1978) found that parental expectations were related to subsequent achievement levels in school. Similarly, Chapman and Boersma (1980) observed a high relationship between mothers' achievement expectations and report card averages ($r = .57$). In terms of learning disabilities, Chapman and Boersma also reported that mothers of grade 3 to 6 LD children had relatively more negative achievement expectations for their children than mothers of normally achieving (NA) children. A possible shortcoming in the Chapman and Boersma investigation was their lack of control for IQ. No other studies were located which dealt with parental expectations of LD children.

The present study extends earlier work by Chapman and Boersma on parental expectations, but with a more carefully screened sample of LD children. In addition, parental perceptions of their children's ability were studied in order to determine the accuracy of the expectations. Unduly pessimistic expectations may be related to inaccurate ability perceptions, which in turn may contribute to a negative emotional climate in the home.

Finally, home demographic factors were also investigated. Learning disabilities have been related to such things as family size, parents' education, occupation and income. Glaser (1974) for example, suggested that children from large families may have more learning

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problems because of distractions during homework arising from overcrowding. And Neifert and Gayton (1973) have surmised that successful remediation is less likely to occur in large families since low achieving students in these families would be unlikely to receive remedial support in the home.

In terms of parents' education, Camlibel (1975) reported that mothers with less than a grade nine education were more likely to have LD children, whereas Helms (1977) found no significant difference in years of formal education between parents of LD and NA children.

When socio-economic levels are considered, little evidence of differences between LD and NA families is apparent. Glaser (1974) suggested that financial pressures could produce less parental interest in school performance. But Campbell (1972), and Chapman and Boersma (1980) have noted that children with learning disabilities come from families of every income level.

Considered together the findings on demographic family factors are somewhat equivocal. Further, few studies compare LD groups with non-LD samples, thus reducing the value of inferences that can be drawn, nor do they match children on intelligence. The purpose of the present study was to examine family stability, parental ability perceptions and achievement expectations, and demographic data for a group of carefully screened LD and NA children which were matched on Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children Revised (WISC-R) IQ scores.

Method

Selection of Sample

Two-hundred and forty grade three children from 11 Edmonton middle class public elementary schools were screened on a short form of the WISC-R (Wechsler, 1974), composed of the Vocabulary and Block Design subtests (Sattler, 1974). This sample included all children currently receiving learning disability resource remediation in those schools, and an equivalent number of randomly selected normally achieving children. The complete WISC-R was then administered to those students whose Short Form IQ scores were within the 85-120 range. This age range was selected to ensure that the final samples would have approximately equal average mean IQ's of 100. The definition of learning disabilities used in the present study was average range ability

with deficiencies of 1 1/2 to 2 1/2 years in one or more academic areas (Chapman & Boersma, 1979). The final sample consisted of 70 LD children and 73 NA children. The mean WISC-R Full Scale IQ scores were, respectfully, 101.26 (SD = 7.04) and 102.56 (SD = 6.35) for the LD and NA groups.

Wide Range Achievement Test scores (Jastak & Jastak, 1976) indicated mean grade equivalent differences between the LD and NA groups of 2.82 years on reading, 1.81 years on spelling, and 0.26 years on arithmetic, with the LD means being significantly lower ($p < .001$) on each of the three subtests. The two groups were similar in age, with the LD groups having a mean age of 8.46 years and the control children having a mean age of 8.27 years.

The samples were reduced slightly in size when mother interview data was collected, primarily because of families moving. Complete data was obtained for 62 LD children (43 boys and 19 girls) and 69 NA children (40 boys and 29 girls). For this final sample, the two groups were similar in terms of socio-economic status, based on major wage earner's occupation as reported by mother, and classified according to the Blishen Scale (Blishen, 1967). Further, the LD children were all receiving part-time (1/2 to 1 hour per day) resource room remedial assistance on the basis of the 1 1/2 to 2 1/2 year deficit in one or more subjects. Most learning problems were in reading. The NA children, on the other hand, were all achieving in the average to above average range and had no history of previous special class placement. No child in the study had serious physical, social or emotional problems, as reported by the school counsellor.

Data Collection

Demographic and family stability data were collected by means of an objective interview, as part of a larger project. Two female graduate students conducted "blind" interviews with the subjects' mothers in their homes, and then jointly coded the data to ensure accurate and reliable scores. The mothers were told that the study dealt with correlates of school learning, and no indication was given regarding interest in learning disabled children. Questions about the family included both demographic data such as age, education, income, and occupation of major wage earner, as well as information about the mother's marital status and current living arrangements, and her

perceptions of her child's ability and expectations for future academic success.

Mothers' perceptions of their children's abilities were assessed by having them rate their children on a 5-point scale from "much below average" to "excellent". Five subject areas were rated: Arithmetic, Printing/Writing, Reading, Spelling and Language. Mothers' expectations for future academic achievement for their children were assessed with the Parents' Version of the Projected Academic Performance Scale (Chapman & Boersma, Note 1). This instrument contains 18 items, with mothers required to rate on a four-point scale, their predictions regarding their child's future achievement in each of six school subjects (reading, spelling, language arts, math, social studies and science). There were three items per subject area.

Results

Family Variables

Family demographic factors did not differentiate LD from NA children. None of the probabilities for chi-square tests of independence between the two groups reached significance. Nor were there any differences in terms of adopted children, age of the mother, education of parents, or family income. Similarly, findings regarding family size were non-significant.

In terms of the family relationship factors, absence of natural father clearly differentiated LD and NA children. For total groups, significantly fewer LD mothers were currently married to their child's natural father ($\chi^2 = 7.61$; $df = 1$; $p < .01$). Analysis of the obtained frequencies indicated that 23 parents of LD children had experienced separation, whereas only 11 parents in the control group had experienced separation. There were no significant differences between the groups in terms of whether or not the mother was currently married, which probably accounts for the non-significant income effect. Number of times mother had been married, or the length of time married to current husband also did not differentiate between the groups.

Of further interest is the tendency of more separated mothers of LD children to report that their children did not see their natural fathers ($\chi^2 = 2.76$; $df = 1$; $p < .10$). Of the 21 LD children whose fathers were no longer living with their families, 13 no longer saw their

fathers, while for the 10 NA children, only 3 did not see their natural fathers. Also of interest is that fact that not only did significantly more LD mother families experience separation, but a greater number of these mothers had also remarried ($\chi^2 = 4.22$; $df = 1$; $p < .05$). Seven mothers of LD children had remarried, while none of the mothers of the control children had remarried. The net effect here was that there were, respectively, 14 and 10 LD and NA single parents in the current sample.

The number of hours per week each child spent with an adult male model (father or male living in the home) approached significance ($\chi^2 = 1.61$, $df = 1$; $p < .10$), with LD male contact tending to be less. This may, in part, be due to the high percentage of separations which occurred in the LD families. The child's age when the parental separation happened did not appear to be critical as there was no significant difference between the two groups in terms of age when parents separated.

Mothers' Ability Perceptions and Achievement Expectations

Mothers' rankings of their children's abilities across five school subjects were significantly ($t = 9.61$; $df = 129$; $p < .001$) lower for the LD ($\bar{X} = 14.44$) than for the NA ($\bar{X} = 19.43$) group. Significant differences were also found for each of the five school subjects, viz., arithmetic, printing/writing, reading, spelling, and language (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
Mothers' Perceptions of their Children's Ability

	LD		Control		t^a	p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Arithmetic	3.23	.76	3.75	.96	3.47	<.001
Printing/Writing	3.05	.84	3.65	.98	3.76	<.001
Reading	2.56	.76	4.19	.79	11.95	<.001
Spelling	2.61	.71	4.01	.74	11.06	<.001
Language	2.92	.66	3.83	.77	7.22	<.001
Total Ability Ranking	14.44	2.65	19.43	3.23	9.61	<.001

^a $df = 129$

Chi-square analysis of childrens' ability to learn, as perceived by mothers, also revealed a significant difference between the LD and NA groups ($\chi^2 = 46.78$; $df = 4$; $p < .001$). Only 10 of the LD mothers stated that their children's ability to learn was excellent or above average, whereas 51 of NA mothers applied those categories to their children. Conversely, 7 LD mothers saw their children as having

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below average ability, while none of the NA mothers selected that option.

Perceptions of ability seem to be a function of obtained achievement levels. So, although the LD subjects in the present study have similar IQ scores to the NA children, lower achievement in school (particularly in reading) appears to be influencing their mothers' perceptions of their ability. To that extent, the mothers' perceptions may be realistic, however, the expectation data also reveal that mothers are pessimistic in terms of LD children attaining higher achievement levels in the future. This perception does not appear to be well founded.

Analyses of Full Scale scores on the Mothers' Version of the Projected Academic Performance scale revealed a strong and highly significant group effect ($F = 29.33$; $df = 1, 128$; $p < .001$). Specifically, mothers of LD children expected their children to perform less well in school than mothers of NA children. In terms of the subject areas, group differences were observed for spelling, reading, language arts, and social studies, but not for math or science. Individual Projected Performance means and standard deviations are presented in Table 2. No significant sex or interaction effects were observed.

TABLE 2
Mothers' Ratings of Projected
Academic Performance

Subject	LD		Control		F ^a	p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Spelling	7.57	1.51	9.73	1.61	54.65	<.001
Reading	7.72	1.66	10.12	1.57	64.01	<.001
Language Arts	7.85	1.40	9.23	1.66	22.78	<.001
Math	8.52	1.57	8.87	2.34	.91	NS
Social Studies	8.37	1.59	9.12	1.54	6.79	<.01
Science	8.35	1.51	8.76	1.60	2.11	NS
Full Scale	48.39	6.45	55.84	8.17	29.33	<.001

^a $df = 1, 128$

Discussion

The present study has observed important differences between LD and NA children in terms of family stability. The significantly greater incidence of natural father absence in the LD group implies that these children may have been exposed to more parental conflict than the NA group. Such exposure could have

contributed to, or compounded, the learning problems experienced by these children in school. As Smart & Smart (1980) have noted, children of divorced parents frequently show learning or behavior problems in school. Similarly, Hetherington, Cox and Cox (1976), in a major study of parent-child interactions in divorced families, observed that "children living with their mother-headed single-parent homes appear to be at higher risk for disruption in cognitive, emotional, and social development than children in nuclear families" (p. 31). In addition, Hetherington *et al.* suggest that poorer parenting practices observed in divorced families were associated with impulsivity, high distractibility, short attention spans, and lack of on-task persistence. These behaviors are frequently characterized as being associated with learning disabilities (Lerner, 1976; Ross, 1976). Their development is said to result from increased antagonism between mothers and children following parental separation (Hetherington *et al.* 1976).

In terms of mothers' ability perceptions and achievement expectations, it was found that LD mothers tended to rate their children as having lower abilities than mothers of normal achievers. Furthermore, LD mothers expected their children to perform less well in the future in comparison to mothers of NA children. Considering the comparable intellectual abilities of the LD and NA children, the data have important implications. By their lower expectations the LD mothers may be indicating that they do not believe that their children have sufficient ability to perform better, and/or that they have little confidence in the remedial services being offered to overcome the learning deficits in their children. Support for the former hypothesis is found in the perceptions of ability data. Here, the LD mothers clearly indicated that their children had inferior academic ability compared to NA children. Certainly these perceptions and expectations are consistent with the LD children's school achievement. Such relatively pessimistic attitudes, however, have been shown in teacher studies to influence adult-child interactions to the extent that low expectations may become self-fulfilling prophecies. Under these circumstances, the chances of bringing LD children to a level of achievement more in line with their potential would likely be hindered.

As important as the factors which were found to discriminate between LD and NA students are those which did not differentiate between the two groups. Family demographic factors such as adoption, family size, parental

education or family income were similar for both groups. Thus, some of the variables which some educators and psychologists traditionally think of as being related to learning disabilities have been found in this study not to differentiate LD children from normal achievers. The lack of income differences between the groups in the present study was due to the fact that a larger number of separated LD had remarried.

The suggestion from this study is that social and interactive factors are associated with learning disabilities. This in turn implies optimism for improving achievement in learning disabled children. The task of effecting these changes, however, should not be underestimated. Remedial programs should include strategies for modifying negative behaviors, and involve parents in the active role of helping to change their children's socioemotional environment. The school counsellor/psychologist should be responsible for providing information and knowledge about learning disabilities, as well as working individually with the parents on specific parenting skills, or helping parents work through their feelings toward their learning disabled child. Some areas which the present study has indicated to be problematic include: 1) understanding the difference between ability and achievement, 2) understanding that learning disabled children have average or normal ability, 3) knowing how to deal with and modify negative behaviors, 4) knowing how to help the child with school-related work at home, 5) understanding the importance of immediate feedback and reinforcement, 6) learning to deal with negative feelings related to the child and his/her low achievement, and 7) learning how to structure opportunities for positive interactions with the child.

The present study also indicates that parental separation and natural father absence may be factors associated with learning disabilities. The psychologist should be aware that parental separation (loss) may affect the child's learning, regardless of the child's age. Individual counselling with the child may be warranted, as well as work with the mother or both parents.

Previous studies have stressed the importance of directly involving parents in remedial programs. Grilli (1974) reported changing LD children's behaviors through a series of parent discussion groups which dealt with the affective needs of children and child-rearing techniques. White (1972) taught parents of LD children to use behavior modification techniques, and

found that not only did the children's maladaptive behavior decrease, but that parents also showed a significant positive change in attitude toward their child. Similarly, another group of children, whose parents had been involved in parent effectiveness training (Giannotti, 1979), showed positive gains in self-concept, classroom behavior and attitude toward their parents. Finally, Edgerly (1975) compared individual tutoring to a combination of parental counselling and child tutoring. Edgerly found that the children who received tutoring and whose parents received counselling showed a significant improvement in achievement. Parental contact and support from the counsellor were suggested to be particularly important in facilitating achievement in these children.

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