

# LIFE SUCCESS

FOR CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

-- A PARENT GUIDE --



**FrostigCenter**

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# LIFE SUCCESS FOR CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES: A PARENT GUIDE

**T**his guide is based on over 20 years of research conducted by the Frostig Center in Pasadena, California. The research traced the lives of individuals with learning disabilities in an attempt to identify factors that predicted successful life outcomes. This guide was developed as part of a larger ongoing study conducted by Dr. Marshall H. Raskind and Dr. Roberta J. Goldberg, co-principal investigators, along with research associates Dr. Eleanor L. Higgins and Dr. Kenneth L. Herman.

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Illustrations by Jay Carlton

*Jay is a successful adult with dyslexia. He is an accomplished artist and an instructor at the Frostig School.*



## INTRODUCTION

*"I never thought I would get very far in life. But look at me now. I didn't do too bad, did I?"*

This comment was made by Vanessa, a 35-year-old family therapist with a learning disability. As an adult, Vanessa has a satisfying career, enjoys a network of caring friends, and is proud of her accomplishments. One might say that Vanessa is "successful." However, it wasn't always that way. As a result of her learning disability, the road to adulthood was paved with years of academic difficulties, problems with social relations, and low self-esteem.

Vanessa's parents also struggled with her learning disability ever since she was first diagnosed in the second grade. They were devastated to discover that their daughter might encounter considerable difficulties learning to read and write, and develop the social and emotional problems often associated with learning disabilities in childhood and adolescence. They navigated through the pain of Vanessa's school failure, the search for the right professionals to conduct assessments and provide instructional and psychological support, endless school meetings to clarify services, and the most difficult task of all -- helping Vanessa grow up with a positive self-image in spite of her learning disability. In this process, like the millions of other parents raising children with learning disabilities, Vanessa's parents became acutely aware that her learning disability would not go away, but was a life-long condition that would continue to affect many spheres of her life.

Even as an adult, Vanessa faces challenges in reading and writing, maintaining friendships, and, at times, feeling good about herself. Yet despite these struggles, she has managed to achieve outward success and lives a personally satisfying and rewarding life. How did this happen? Why do some people with learning disabilities succeed like Vanessa, while others find little reward personally, socially, or financially? Why do some individuals find success, while it eludes others?

The purpose of this guide is to provide answers to these and related questions for parents raising children with learning disabilities. The information presented here is based upon a 20-year study tracing the lives of individuals with learning disabilities from childhood into adulthood in an attempt to identify individual characteristics and life experiences that lead to successful life outcomes. The guide also draws upon the work of other researchers<sup>1</sup> who have identified factors that contribute to success. We hope that the following pages will help parents as they work with their children to reach their full potential and become competent, content, and independent adults who live satisfying lives. But first, it is important to define what we mean by "success."



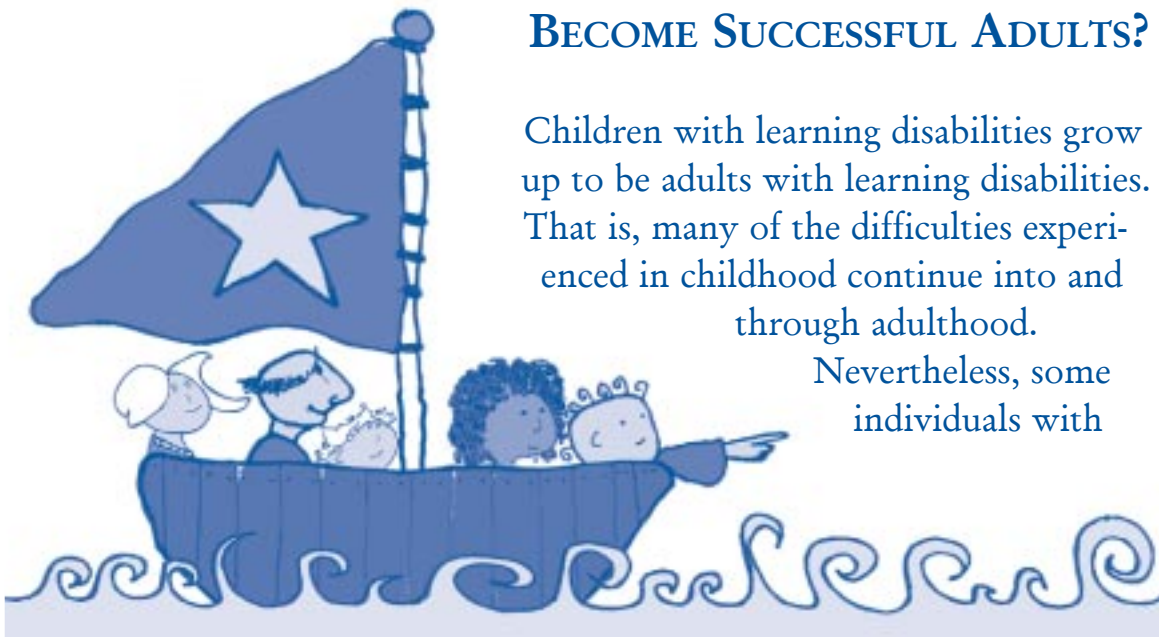
## WHAT IS SUCCESS?

Success is not easy to define. It means different things to different people. In addition, it may mean something different at different times in a person's life. However, although views of success may differ, there appear to be a number of things that most people include when they think of success. These include good friends, positive family relations, being loved, self-approval, job satisfaction, physical and mental health, financial comfort, spiritual contentment, and an overall sense of meaning in one's life. Of course, different individuals may place lesser or greater emphasis on these various components of success.

## HOW DO CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES BECOME SUCCESSFUL ADULTS?

Children with learning disabilities grow up to be adults with learning disabilities. That is, many of the difficulties experienced in childhood continue into and through adulthood.

Nevertheless, some individuals with



learning disabilities follow a life path that leads them to success, becoming productive members of society and living satisfying and rewarding lives. Others find little more than continued "failure," and are barely able to "keep their heads above water" emotionally, socially, or financially. Why, despite similar backgrounds and learning problems, does one individual end up with a rewarding career, long-term friendships, and financial stability, yet another, a life of loneliness, isolation, and financial stress? Learning disabilities research has provided some answers to this question.

Our research at the Frostig Center,<sup>2</sup> as well as several major studies by others,<sup>3</sup> has focused on identifying which factors contribute to success for individuals with learning disabilities. Results from these projects point to the importance of a set of personal characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors that can help lead persons with learning disabilities to successful life outcomes. By tracing the lives of individuals with learning disabilities throughout the lifespan, these studies have revealed a number of "success attributes" that guide an individual to either positive or negative adult outcomes.



## WHAT ARE THE SUCCESS ATTRIBUTES?

Our 20-year study, in particular, highlighted the importance of six success attributes for individuals with learning disabilities. These success attributes included: *self-awareness, proactivity, perseverance, goal-setting, the presence and use of effective support systems, and emotional coping strategies*. It is important to emphasize that not every successful individual possesses each of these attributes, and some attributes may be present to a greater or lesser degree. Similarly, persons who might be considered "unsuccessful" may nevertheless possess some of the success attributes, again, to a lesser or greater degree. What it does mean is that successful persons with learning disabilities are much more likely to have these characteristics than unsuccessful individuals. It is our hope that, by helping parents understand these success attributes, they will be better prepared to work with and guide their children toward satisfying and rewarding lives. It is also important to keep in mind that having these attributes does not guarantee success. Rather, it increases the chances of achieving a fulfilling and successful life. It is interesting to note that our research indicates that these characteristics may have a greater influence on success than even such factors as academic achievement, gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, and even intelligence quotient (IQ).<sup>4</sup>

Each of the success attributes is discussed in the following pages. Quotes from successful adults with learning disabilities are used to help explain each attribute from the viewpoint of individuals who live with learning disabilities.



## **S**ELF-AWARENESS

*“As I said, I have dyslexia. I have never not had dyslexia, so it always has, and always will, affect my life. I don’t know what it’s like not to have dyslexia. I don’t know that I want to do life over again without it. It’s part of me. It will hinder me, as it has, and it will push me into places where I never would have gone.”*

--Thirty-three-year-old male

Successful people with learning disabilities are aware of the types of problems they have, including academic problems like reading and math, academic-related problems such as attentional or organizational difficulties, and non-academic difficulties such as motor deficits or emotional/ behavioral problems. They are open and specific about their difficulties and understand how they affect their lives. Most important, these individuals have the ability to *compartmentalize* their disability. That is, they are able to see their learning difficulties as only *one* aspect of themselves. Although they are well aware of their learning limitations, they are not overly defined by them. As one successful individual states:



*“You know, everybody comes with a package. And yeah, there are things that*

*I am good at and things that I am not so good at. Some of my limitations are reading and writing. But boy, when it comes to putting things together, reading plans, and chasing down problems, those are some talents, some skills that I was born with . . . I carved a different path and my whole life has been that way."*

Successful individuals with learning disabilities recognize their talents along with accepting their limitations. This idea is expressed particularly well by one adult who stresses, *"We all learn differently; we all have strengths and weaknesses."*

Another adult with a learning disability shares, *"It's still there and I compensate . . . I think the problems that I had were no different than anybody else who is conscious of their weaknesses, and then some of their strengths. Some people are not conscious at all."*

In addition to recognizing their strengths, weaknesses, and special talents, successful adults with learning disabilities are also able to find jobs that provide the best fit or "match" with their abilities. For example, an individual with severe reading problems, but exceptional skills in woodworking might find a successful career in cabinet making rather than as a copy editor. A person with math deficits, but excellent writing abilities might shy away from a career in accounting, yet find success in journalism. And, the individual with poor reading and writing, but strong oral language skills might pursue sales and avoid jobs requiring substantial written language abilities.

Unsuccessful people with learning disabilities, on the other hand, often fail to recognize both their strengths and limitations, accept their difficulties, compartmentalize their learning disability, and find employment that provides the best fit for their abilities.



## ROACTIVITY

Successful adults with learning disabilities are generally actively engaged in the world around them -- politically, economically, and socially. They participate in community activities and take an active role in their families, neighborhoods, and friendship groups. Additionally, they often step into leadership roles at work, in the community, and in social and family settings.



Not surprisingly, therefore, successful persons with learning disabilities also believe that they have the power to control their own destiny and affect the outcome of their lives. In talking about how he took charge of his college experience, one successful adult

remarks:

*"I actually didn't take classes as much as I took professors. The way I got through college was I looked at the classes I was interested in and I was over at the professors' office times telling them I'm going to need extra time; give me the ability to take the written exam orally. There are a bunch of exceptions and I just listed them out for these people."*

This quote demonstrates the kind of creative self-advocacy and initiative we frequently observed in successful adults. In contrast, unsuccessful individuals tend merely to respond to events and are passive.

Successful persons with learning disabilities also show the ability to make decisions and act upon those decisions. Additionally, they assume responsibility for their actions and resulting outcomes. In talking about how his shyness interfered with trying to meet a girl, one successful adult shares:

*"I looked at that lesson and said, "OK, you blew it that time. What are you going to do? How are you going to overcome that situation?" So I systematically started working on getting over my shyness . . . And last spring . . . "*

When things don't work out, successful individuals generally take responsibility for the outcome and do not blame others. Commenting on his career, the same individual expresses commitment to action, *"Anything I'm going to do, I'm going to give it my all. Otherwise I'm not going to touch it."*

A willingness to consult with others while making decisions is also characteristic of successful people with learning disabilities. In that connection, they also appear to be flexible in considering and weighing options. For instance, when faced with a career-ending knee surgery, one successful athlete was able to smoothly shift her career focus to a pottery business. Another individual whose learning disability prevented him from passing required college courses, researched and transferred to a universi-

ty that did not require those courses for graduation.

In contrast, unsuccessful individuals often do not recognize that situations can be altered, or that multiple solutions may exist. Instead, they are either passive, making no decision, or conversely, stick rigidly to a simplistic, rule-based decision even if it ultimately fails. Successful individuals, on the other hand, take responsibility for both the positive and negative outcomes of their decisions and actions. For example, one former student commenting on his success stated:

*"I think that I worked hard and I made choices instead of letting things happen. I mean stuff that I haven't actively gone and taken care of are the only things that I'm not as satisfied with. The stuff that I've gone and taken care of, I'm very happy with."*



## PERSEVERANCE

Many persons with learning disabilities show great perseverance and keep pursuing their chosen path despite difficulties. They often describe themselves in such terms as *"I am not a quitter,"* and *"I never give up."*

However, successful individuals demonstrate an additional important ability -- knowing when to quit. Although they rarely give up on a general goal, depending on the situation, they may change the way they go about achieving it, thereby improving their chances



for success. In other words, after repeated failure, these individuals are able to see and pursue alternative strategies for reaching their goal, or know when the goal itself might have to be modified. Often they try several strategies until they find one that works. One successful adult states, *"Once I have a failure, I can't just dwell on that failure and restrict myself for the rest of my life. I'll do something else."* In contrast, unsuccessful individuals are typically not flexible and often appear to "beat their

heads against the wall," failing to recognize when it is time to reevaluate their strategies, or the goal itself.

Successful persons with learning disabilities appear to learn from their hardships making statements such as *"I have failed many times, but I am not a failure. I have learned to succeed from my failures."* In addition, successful people seem to agree that difficult situations are necessary for learning. In comparison, unsuccessful individuals with learning disabilities are often overwhelmed by adversity, back away from challenges, and give up much more easily and quickly than successful peers.





## GOAL-SETTING

Successful individuals set goals that are specific, yet flexible so that they can be changed to adjust to specific circumstances and situations. These goals cover a number of areas including education, employment, family, spiritual and personal development. In addition, the goals of successful persons with learning disabilities include a strategy to reach their goals. That is, they have an understanding of the step-by-step process for obtaining goals. One successful adult pursuing a career in the entertainment field states:

*"I always look at every move, like this particular move doing the video, as a stepping stone for the next project. That's how I'm looking at it. As I said, the area I really want to move into is, I want to direct."*



Successful people also appear to have goals that are realistic and attainable.

*"I'll tell you something. I'm very realistic in terms of what I know I can do, what I possibly can do, and what I cannot do. That's why I knew right off the*

*bat that I was not going to be a doctor."*

-- Thirty-one-year-old male

Many successful people with learning disabilities set at least tentative goals in adolescence, which provide direction and meaning to their lives. A successful adult trained as a social worker says:

*"When I was in late high school, I knew what I wanted to do when I grew up. I was given the opportunity to babysit and in the twelfth grade I worked at a day camp. I just discovered that I was interested in children and that this may turn out to be a profession. So there was kind of a break and something to shoot for; some sort of self-direction."*

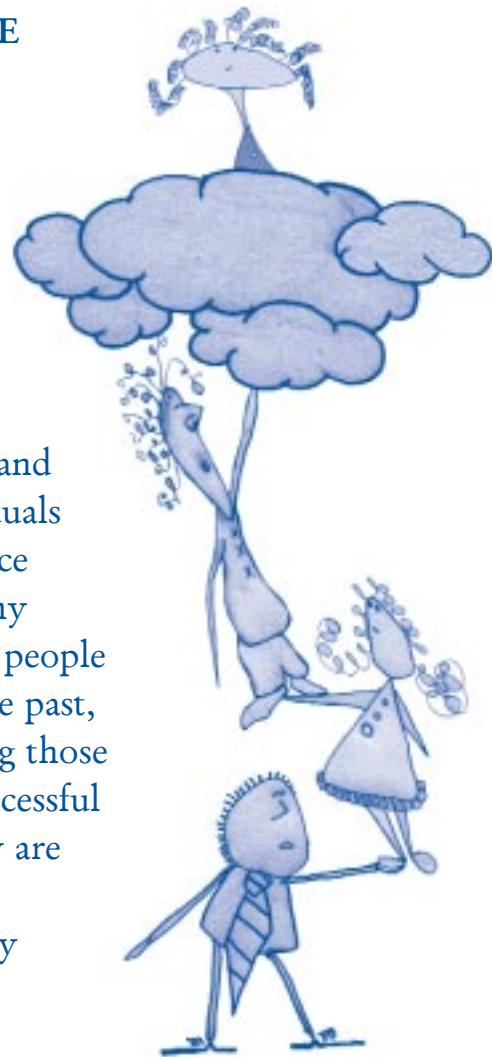
While successful individuals with learning disabilities have concrete, realistic, and attainable goals, unsuccessful individuals often have vague, unrealistic, or grandiose goals that are not in line with their strengths, weaknesses, or special abilities. For example, one individual having extreme problems with eye-hand coordination and spatial relations aspired to be an airline pilot, while another with severe reading, writing, and organization difficulties wanted to become an executive secretary. Not surprisingly, both were unsuccessful at their attempts to reach these goals and experienced frustration and stress as a result.



## DEPENDENCE & USE OF EFFECTIVE SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Both successful and unsuccessful individuals with learning disabilities receive some form of support and assistance from others over the course of their lives. Guidance, support, and encouragement come from family members, friends, mentors, teachers, therapists, and co-workers. However, as successful individuals move into adulthood, they attempt to reduce their dependence on others. In fact, in many instances they are able to switch roles with people who had provided them with support in the past, finding themselves assisting and encouraging those who once helped them. In contrast, unsuccessful persons with learning disabilities frequently are unable to "cut the cord" as they transition into adulthood and end up remaining highly dependent on others.

The people who have provided support to successful individuals with learning disabilities generally



held clear and realistic expectations regarding life goals and outcomes, guiding them to identify and achieve realistic goals without being harsh or critical. They were also able to help them change directions in attempting to achieve goals, or modify the goals, if necessary. They were consistent and steadfast in their functioning as sounding boards for reality testing. A successful adult with learning disabilities describes the support from a workplace mentor:

*"I guess you could say he rescued me. I was working at this place and going nowhere. Probably getting canned and I only had a couple of more months of work and he was able to take me out of the division I was in and put me back working on minicomputers. That made me very happy. He taught me a new programming language to work in and really helped me out. He's one of the reasons I own this place."*

Successful individuals with learning disabilities also actively seek the support of others. They don't simply wait for someone to come to their aid when they need assistance. Rather, they take the initiative to get help. Furthermore, they are willing to accept help when it is offered. By contrast, unsuccessful individuals are not as likely to actively seek support or accept it when offered.



## MOTIONAL COPING STRATEGIES

All people with learning disabilities experience stress in their lives as a result of living with learning problems. Such stress can be experienced in a variety of settings -- school, work, home, and social life. In some cases, the stress can be so significant that it leads to psychological difficulties such as anxiety and depression.

However, although all persons with learning disabilities may experience disability-related stress, successful individuals appear to have developed effective means of reducing and coping with stress, frustration, and the emotional aspects of their learning disabilities. In particular, there appear to be three components of successful emotional coping:



- Awareness of the situations that trigger stress;
- Recognition of developing stress;
- Availability/access to and use of coping strategies.

For example, a successful adult with learning disabilities in our study manages her anxiety attacks by recognizing that reading aloud in a group triggers anxiety, physical symptoms such as rapid breathing are signs of stress, and slow deep breathing reduces her anxiety.

Successful individuals have developed strategies for reducing stress and avoiding resulting psychological difficulties. Such strategies include seeking counseling, asking others to do unmanageable tasks on the job, changing activities periodically so stress does not build up, expressing feelings, asserting oneself, utilizing peer support and encouragement, learning to ask for help, planning ahead for difficult situations, keeping away from negative or critical persons, obtaining medication if necessary, working out differences with friends and family, and sharing with sympathetic family members.

Whereas recognizing triggers and using coping strategies helps successful individuals with learning disabilities cope, unsuccessful persons with learning disabilities report being blindsided by events that cause stress. When overly stressed or emotionally wrought, they have great difficulty thinking of potential resources -- both internal and external -- to help them reduce stress and regain stability.



## HOW CAN A CHILD DEVELOP SUCCESS ATTRIBUTES?

Research has shown that *self-awareness, proactivity, perseverance, goal-setting, the presence and use of effective support systems, and emotional coping strategies* help lead persons with learning disabilities to success. However, to date no research tells us exactly how to teach these attributes. Yet, research does suggest a number of key components and areas that need to be considered in fostering success attributes in children with learning disabilities. The following section discusses these components and areas, and offers recommendations for how to develop success attributes. In reading the following pages, please keep in mind that the specific approach to developing success attributes is dependent upon the age, abilities, experience, interests, and living environment of a given child.

Before reading the



following recommendations for how to develop the success attributes, you may want to take a moment and think about whether your child "possesses" them. Although there are no specific tests or scientific procedures for determining the presence of the attributes in your child, your response to the statements in the boxes below may give a general indication. You may also want to consider information from other people who know your child (teachers, family members, counselors, etc.) in responding to these statements.



My child...

- Is aware of his/her academic strengths
- Is aware of his/her academic weaknesses
- Is aware of his/her non-academic strengths
- Is aware of his/her non-academic weaknesses
- Is aware of his/her special talents and abilities
- Is aware of his/her feelings, opinions, and values
- Is able to match activities to strengths
- Understands his/her specific learning disability
- Accepts his/her learning disability
- Is able to "compartmentalize"
- Uses strategies to work around the learning disability

## **SELF-AWARENESS**

Research suggests that self-awareness is made up of a number of components. These components must be addressed in any effort to enhance the self-awareness of children with learning disabilities. Note they deal with both general self-awareness and awareness related specifically to the learning disability.

### **General Self-Awareness**

In order to develop self-awareness, persons with learning disabilities need to:

- Understand what self-awareness is and its importance;
- Develop awareness of personal strengths, weaknesses, and talents in various settings (not only school);
- Gain awareness of their feelings, opinions, and personal values and how they relate to those of others;
- Develop their own definition of success;
- Develop "niche-picking skills" (matching their abilities to specific settings).

### **Learning Disability Awareness**

In order to develop self-awareness, persons with learning disabilities need to:

- Develop an understanding of their specific learning disability and how it may affect their life;
- Develop awareness of successful coping strategies to compensate for their learning disability;
- Learn to accept and compartmentalize their learning disability.

Far too often, the development of self-awareness focuses almost entirely on academic performance at school. However, in order to gain the highest level of self-awareness and acceptance, an individual must understand his or her strengths, weaknesses, special talents, desires, fears, and beliefs in a number of areas. These include:

- Psychological/emotional;
- Physical;
- Social;
- Educational;

- Communicative;
- Philosophical (personal values, ethics).

### GENERAL ACTIVITIES FOR FOSTERING SELF-AWARENESS

- Work with your child to develop and discuss lists of his or her individual strengths, weaknesses, and special talents or interests. Consider all areas, not just school-related.
- Use the words "strength," "weakness," "limitations," and "special talents" to describe the behavior of all members of your family.
- Arrange for your child to talk to adults with learning disabilities about their experiences — both struggles and triumphs. If you have a learning disability yourself, share your own feelings, experiences, and thoughts.
- Help your child choose potential jobs and careers that best match his or her abilities and discuss relevant choices.

My child...

- Participates in classroom and extra-curricular social activities
- Makes decisions and acts upon those decisions
- Understands the advantages/disadvantages of making certain decisions
- Recognizes when a decision needs to be made
- Knows how to evaluate decisions
- Takes responsibility for his/her actions
- Feels he/she has control over his/her world
- Is assertive and stands up for him-/herself
- Is self-confident

## PROACTIVITY

There is life beyond school for children with learning disabilities. While learning to be proactive in educational pursuits is important, persons with learning disabilities also need to develop the attribute of proactivity for *social, employment, interpersonal, familial, and recreational settings*. With regard to each of these settings, children with learning disabilities need to learn to:

- Understand proactivity, its importance, and benefits;
- Make decisions, act upon those decisions, and evaluate their decisions;
- Understand the advantages and disadvantages of making certain decisions and take responsibility for their actions;
- Act as self-advocates and be assertive while engaging in the world;

- Develop the self-confidence to take risks and be flexible.

### GENERAL ACTIVITIES FOR FOSTERING PROACTIVITY

- ✓ Introduce problem-solving vocabulary into your family discussions. Share your personal challenges and dilemmas and what strategies you have employed. Present your child with examples of people facing problems, and have your child discuss or role-play action-oriented strategies for resolving these difficulties.
- ✓ Have your child write down or discuss important decisions he or she has made, the strategies used to make the decisions, the results of those decisions, and whether or not the correct decision was made.
- ✓ Present your child with examples of people's behavior and the specific outcomes resulting from the behavior. Then discuss the extent to which the individual had control over his or her behaviors.
- ✓ Present your child with a number of "risky" scenarios and discuss the possible consequences of specific actions.

In order to foster proactivity, the following activities are recommended.

My child . . .

- Understands the benefits of perseverance
- Keeps working at academic tasks despite difficulties
- Keeps working at non-academic tasks despite difficulties
- Knows how to deal with obstacles/setbacks
- Knows how to adjust to change
- Knows when to quit

## PERSEVERANCE

This success attribute, like all the others, needs to be developed in a number of areas beyond school. Attention has to be given to fostering perseverance in the following areas: *educational, cognitive, physical, psychological, employment, social, leisure, and spiritual*. With regard to these areas, children with learning disabilities should learn to:

- Understand the meaning of perseverance;
- Understand the benefits of persevering and the consequences of not;
- Develop strategies for dealing with obstacles, setbacks, and adjusting to change;
- Recognize that passion and desire keep one moving in the face of adversity.

In order to foster perseverance, the following activities are recommended.

#### GENERAL ACTIVITIES FOR FOSTERING PERSEVERANCE

- Share inspirational stories (tell, read, watch movies) of people who have persevered in the face of adversity.
- Have your child share his or her own stories (tell, write, draw) about times when he or she did not persevere and the resulting outcomes.
- Have your child keep journals focusing on experiences requiring perseverance
- Have your child keep a record of when he or she is, or is not persevering.
- Praise your child for persevering behavior and attitude when playing games, learning new sports, and doing unpopular chores.

My child . . .

- Sets academic goals
- Sets non-academic goals
- Can prioritize goals
- Knows when a goal is realistic
- Develops plans/steps for reaching goals
- Understands the relationship between short and long-term goals
- Finds alternative ways to reach goals when faced with obstacles
- Understands the need to work with others to reach goals

## GOAL-SETTING

It is important to help students with learning disabilities develop goal-setting abilities in a number of areas. As for several of the other success attributes, far too often, emphasis is placed exclusively on educational success. In an effort to assist children with learning disabilities achieve life success, research suggests that it is also necessary to develop goal-setting skills related to *social relationships, employment, family, physical health, psychological health, leisure activities, finances, independent living, and spiritual development*. Specific focus should be placed on assisting children to:

- Develop strategies for setting goals;
- Define a goal;
- Understand the benefits of goal-setting and the consequences of not setting goals;
- Develop strategies for prioritizing goals, evaluating whether a goal is



- realistic, and the action steps needed to reach a goal;
- Develop strategies to predict and overcome obstacles, and to reevaluate and adjust goals as needed;
  - Understand the need to work with others to reach goals.

In order to foster goal-setting abilities, the following activities are recom-

#### GENERAL ACTIVITIES FOR DEVELOPING GOAL-SETTING ABILITIES

- ✓ Have your child write down a real, short-term academic goal and discuss the step-by-step process for reaching it (for example, oral report on an early explorer, project on life in the American colonies, term paper on Shakespeare).
- ✓ Develop a realistic timeline for completion of a future school project, including typical "obstacles" such as a sports practice, birthday party, favorite TV show, and other distractions.
- ✓ Have your child set a long-term career goal and discuss the step-by-step process for reaching it. Arrange opportunities for your child to interview someone in that career, emphasizing goal-setting behavior.
- ✓ Discuss successful individuals and determine the experiences, backgrounds, opportunities, and critical events that led these individuals to their success.
- ✓ Present fictional examples of people with specific goals and, based on their strengths, weaknesses, and special talents, discuss whether their goals appear realistic.

mended.

My child . . .

- Knows when he/she needs help
- Knows how to get help
- Seeks help when needed
- Is willing to use technological supports
- Is aware of laws to help persons with learning disabilities

## PRESENCE & USE OF EFFECTIVE SUPPORT SYSTEMS

It is clear from research that individuals with learning disabilities need support in a number of areas including: *education, employment, social relationships, psychological health, independent living, family relationships, and recreational activities*. It is critical that individuals with learning disabilities are aware of, and know how to access and utilize, support services in each of these areas. Particular attention should be directed at helping children with learning disabilities:

- Understand the benefits of using support systems;
- Develop strategies for finding, accessing, utilizing, and maintaining support systems;
- Recognize "triggers" indicating that help is needed;
- Learn to accept help, give help, and develop trust in others;
- Understand laws that mandate support/assistance for persons with disabilities;
- Gain awareness of learning disabilities organizations and advocacy groups;

- Learn to use technological help.

In order to foster the ability to develop and use support systems, the fol-

#### GENERAL ACTIVITIES FOR DEVELOPING & USING SUPPORT SYSTEMS

- Model how to ask for help in daily family interactions.
- Share stories (tell, read, see movies) about individuals who needed help from others, how they got it, and the benefits of receiving it.
- Seize opportunities to analyze examples of individuals in need of help. Discuss possible sources and means of accessing support as well as possible outcomes with and without support (for example, news stories, TV sitcom crises, reports of friends in need of help).
- Obtain information on federal laws related to individuals with disabilities and discuss it with your child.
- Have your child try out technology that might be helpful in compensating for his/her difficulties, such as spell checkers, tape recorders, and word processors.

lowing activities are recommended.

My child . . .

- Is aware of how his/her emotional reactions affect behavior
- Is aware of situations that cause stress, frustration and emotional upset
- Has developed strategies for avoiding or reducing stress
- Is able to recognize the onset of stress
- Knows when outside support/help is needed

## EMOTIONAL COPING STRATEGIES

Successful individuals with learning disabilities develop an awareness of their emotional states and specific coping strategies for dealing with stress, frustration, and adversity. In an effort to assist children with learning disabilities to develop coping strategies, we suggest that efforts be aimed at helping them:

- Understand the various factors that affect psychological health;
- Become aware of their various emotional reactions and how these reactions impact their behavior;
- Learn to recognize stress triggers;
- Develop strategies for avoiding or reducing stress (as possible);
- Develop a repertoire of coping strategies;
- Learn to recognize when they need outside support/help.

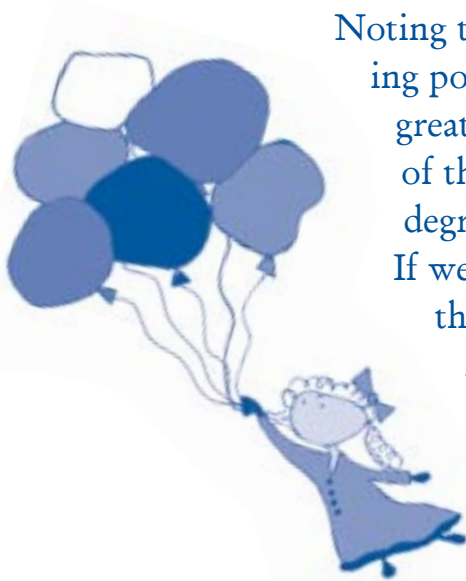
In order to foster the development of emotional coping strategies, the following activities are recommended.

#### GENERAL ACTIVITIES FOR DEVELOPING EMOTIONAL COPING STRATEGIES

- Use words in discussions with your child that identify feelings (for example, angry, disappointed, defeated, frustrated, proud, impatient).
- Ask your child to discuss the circumstances that create the greatest stress in his or her life in relation to his or her learning disability (reading aloud in class, correcting a classmate's paper, picking up social cues at parties, etc.).
- Have your child write down how his or her body feels at the onset of stress. Discuss with your child the warning signs of stress and how to employ coping strategies.
- Have your child identify strategies that help reduce stress (for example, relaxation techniques, weight lifting, a game of basketball, listening to music, the movies).
- Guide your child to know when learning disability-related emotional needs reach a critical point requiring outside help and how to access the right help.
- Help your child develop and nurture good peer relationships.

## ONCLUSION

Research has shown that a set of personal characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors can help lead persons with learning disabilities to successful life outcomes. Unfortunately, we often concentrate our efforts primarily on academic/educational areas, paying little attention to the development of these attributes in persons with learning disabilities.



Noting the importance of these attributes in promoting positive life outcomes, it is reasonable to direct greater efforts toward fostering the development of these success attributes, at least to the same degree that we strive to improve academic skills. If we remind ourselves that research has shown that learning disabilities persist into adulthood, and that children with learning disabilities must ultimately function in settings beyond school, the importance of enhancing these attributes becomes more apparent. This shift in focus is by no means intended to undermine the importance of developing academic skills in children with learning disabilities. Rather, our

intention is to emphasize the importance of developing success attributes in addition to, or alongside academic skills. Although the extent to which these attributes can be taught to, or learned by students with learning disabilities, is not completely clear, we do know that they are critical to attaining life success.

Fostering the success attributes is one of the ways that parents can help their children with learning disabilities grow up to be more successful throughout their lives. These attitudes, behaviors, and characteristics require exercise, practice, and review just like any other skill children learn. At different life stages, new developmentally appropriate challenges may require parents to recycle and revisit with their children the success attributes they had worked on earlier.

Examples from the successful adult, Vanessa, may help illustrate this point. Vanessa's mother had to work hard on her daughter's self-awareness during the early stages of identification of her learning disability. "Strength and weakness language" was prevalent in family discussions with often-tearful Vanessa as she navigated the academic challenges of elementary and middle school. Proactivity was the topic of long summer afternoons between seventh and eighth grade, as Vanessa's mother helped her actively set social dates with potential girlfriends who might otherwise pass her by over the summer. These times were often stressful, since Vanessa had difficulty reading the sophisticated social cues of teenage girls at slumber parties. Over time, she and her mother settled on some successful stress-reduction coping strategies to employ in these situations.

In high school, after a couple of failed cashiering jobs at popular teenage clothing stores, Vanessa's father helped her take stock of what type of employment would be more suitable for her, given her learning disability and her strengths, weaknesses, and interests. As a result, Vanessa set an attainable goal of getting a job at a local preschool working with children. This proved to be a good niche for her in high school, and later

shaped the direction of her college studies and, ultimately, her career as an adult. Getting into the state college was a great accomplishment for Vanessa and her parents, but failing the writing proficiency exam was a huge blow to Vanessa's academic self-confidence. Her mother helped her revisit perseverance and support networks, and Vanessa also sought the advice of a college counselor, who helped her get into an English proficiency class at the local junior college over the summer. She struggled, didn't give up, and passed!

At times, the challenges children like Vanessa face growing up with learning disabilities are too great for them and their parents. In those instances, whenever in the life course they may arise, families may need help from appropriate counselors, therapists, and learning disability specialists. Several of the organizations listed in the Resource section at the back of this guide, along with their state and local affiliates, may be helpful in locating appropriate support and services. Raising a child with learning disabilities is hard, persistent work. It can dominate family life and be stressful for parents, as well as siblings. Don't hesitate to get help for yourselves, as well as extended family members.

On a final note, it turns out that children growing up with learning disabilities appreciate all that parents do for them during the difficult years, whether they ever say thank you or not. We close with a few quotes from adult study participants expressing the gratitude they feel toward their parents as they reflect back on their lives from age 35.

*"My mom was the one to come in and talk to teachers, principals. . . . She was always the one to take me around and stay there with me. I can imagine it was, at times, stressful for her, but I never felt it."*



*"My father really cared. He wanted me to have the best. And he did. He made sure of that. [He] always gave me the self confidence and self-esteem that I lacked in myself. He made me feel that I was able to do anything I wanted to do."*

Such quotes demonstrate the appreciation the participants in our study expressed for the sacrifices their mothers and fathers made on their behalf and underscore the impact their parents' efforts have had on their developing into successful, personally fulfilled adults, despite challenges along the way.

## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Henry B. Reiff, Paul J. Gerber, Rick Ginsberg. *Exceeding Expectations: Successful Adults with Learning Disabilities*. Pro-ed, 1997. Emmy E. Werner and Ruth S. Smith, *Overcoming the Odds: High Risk Children from Birth to Adulthood*. Cornell University Press, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Marshall H. Raskind, Roberta J. Goldberg, Eleanor L. Higgins, and Kenneth L. Herman. *Patterns of Change and Predictors of Success in Individuals with Learning Disabilities: Results from a Twenty-Year Longitudinal Study*, *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice*, 1999; Roberta J. Goldberg, Eleanor L. Higgins, Marshall H. Raskind, and Kenneth L. Herman. *Predictors of Success in Individuals with Learning Disabilities: A Qualitative Analysis of a 20-Year Longitudinal Study*, *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice*, in press.

<sup>3</sup> Henry B. Reiff, Paul J. Gerber, Rick Ginsberg. *Exceeding Expectations: Successful Adults with Learning Disabilities*. Pro-ed, 1997. Emmy E. Werner and Ruth S. Smith, *Overcoming the Odds: High Risk Children from Birth to Adulthood*. Cornell University Press, 1992.

<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that these factors do not have a substantial impact on the life outcomes of persons with learning disabilities, but rather that research has shown that the success attributes may play an even greater role. Of course, such factors as extreme poverty or severe psychiatric problems can have a profound affect on someone's life and even negate the influence of the success attributes.

# **R**ESOURCES

## **Coordinated Campaign for Learning Disabilities**

[www.AboutLD.org](http://www.AboutLD.org)

## **Council for Learning Disabilities (CLD)**

P.O. Box 40303

Overland Park, KS 66204

(913) 492-8755 • Fax: (913) 492-2546

[www.cldinternational.org](http://www.cldinternational.org)

## **Division for Learning Disabilities (DLD) of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC)**

1110 North Glebe Road, Suite 300

Arlington, VA 22201

(703) 620-3660 • Fax: (703) 264-9494

Toll-free: (800) 328-0272

[www.teachingld.org](http://www.teachingld.org)

## **International Dyslexia Association (IDA)**

Chester Building, Suite 382

8600 LaSalle Road

Baltimore, MD 21286

(410) 296-0232 • Fax: (410) 321-5069

Toll-free: (800) ABC-D123

[www.interdys.org](http://www.interdys.org)

## **LD Online**

[www.LDonline.org](http://www.LDonline.org)

## **Learning Disability Association of America (LDA)**

4156 Library Road

Pittsburgh, PA 15234-1349

(412) 341-1515 • Fax: (412) 344-0224

Toll-free: (888) 300-6710

[www.ldanatl.org](http://www.ldanatl.org)

## **National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD)**

381 Park Avenue South, Suite 1401

New York, NY 10016

(212) 545-7510 • Fax: 545-9665

Toll-free: (800) 575-7373

[www.ld.org](http://www.ld.org)

## **National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (NICHCY)**

P.O. Box 1492

Washington, DC 20013-1492

(202) 884-8200 • Fax: (202) 884-8441

Toll-free: (800) 695-0285

[www.nichcy.org](http://www.nichcy.org)

## **Schwab Learning**

1650 S. Amphlett Blvd., Suite 300

San Mateo, CA 94402

(650) 655-2410 • Fax: (650) 655-2411

[www.schwablearning.org](http://www.schwablearning.org)

## THE FROSTIG CENTER

The Frostig Center is a non-profit organization that specializes in working with children who have learning disabilities. Founded in 1951 by Marianne Frostig, a pioneer in the study, diagnosis, and treatment of learning disabilities, the Center is dedicated to a three-part mission of:

- Conducting research on learning disabilities;
- Providing professional training and consultation to the community;
- Offering direct instructional services to children with learning disabilities through the Frostig School and other community services.

## **FrostigCenter**

971 North Altadena Drive  
Pasadena, California 91107  
[www.frostig.org](http://www.frostig.org)

**A DOWNLOADABLE VERSION  
OF THIS GUIDE IS AVAILABLE AT:  
[www.LDsuccess.org](http://www.LDsuccess.org)**