



## Ask Chris

This month Chris Turner answers questions about learning disabilities.

Chris Turner, our learning difficulties consultant, has many years experience providing sound advice to students and tutors who are struggling to master a particular skill. In this new feature column, Chris will answer real-life questions from tutors and students. Send your questions to the Council.

### **What is a learning disability?**

There are many different definitions for learning disabilities. The National Institute for Literacy defines learning disabilities as a group of disorders “manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning or mathematical abilities.” Current definitions also emphasize three additional points:

Learning disabilities are believed to be caused by a problem in the central nervous system.

They are unrelated to general intelligence. Most people with learning disabilities have average or above average intelligence.

Learning disabilities can be present at any age. People can learn to deal effectively with these disabilities, but they do not go away.

### **How many people are learning disabled?**

Current researchers estimate that anywhere from 10-20% of the general population suffer from learning disabilities that make it difficult for them to succeed in school. Many of these learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, are reading specific. There are many reasons why a person might not have learned to read in school, but we suspect that many of our students suffer from an undiagnosed learning disability.

### **How can you tell if someone has a learning disability?**

Determining whether a person has a learning disability is an expensive and time-consuming process that must be conducted by a trained professional. The Literacy Council is currently investigating screening procedures that would allow us to know when further testing might be appropriate.

### **How do you help people with learning disabilities?**

There doesn't appear to be any magic answer for working with students with learning disabilities. However, techniques that include clear goals and objectives, very active student involvement in all aspects of the tutoring and continual evaluation of progress seem to be proving effective. These techniques should be equally effective with any new reader.

### **What is the Literacy Council doing to help learning disabled students and their tutors?**

The National Institute for Literacy is sponsoring a learning disabilities training project to help literacy organizations better understand the needs of learning-disabled students in order to improve their outcomes. Literacy providers are being asked to consider systemic changes in how they operate. The Cape Fear Literacy Council has been selected to be part of this exciting project. Our first training session will take place in early May.

We will have an opportunity to examine the ways we presently work with tutors and students — to look at intake procedures, tutor training, instruction and materials and then to set goals that will enable us to help all students more effectively, regardless of whether they have a diagnosed learning disability. We will be holding some in-service training on working with learning disabled students later in the year.

**How can I get involved?**

If you want to know more about learning disabilities or participate in a pilot program for tutoring students with learning disabilities, give Billie Granger a call at 251-0911.