

## Slow Learners

Legal:

- “Children in need of remedial instruction, such as children who are behind a grade level or who are ‘*slow learners*’ but who have not been diagnosed as having a specific learning disability or other disability are NOT considered persons with disabilities.”  
U.S. Commission on Civil Rights Report, Sept. 1997
- “Excessive accommodation can result in denial of benefit or opportunity. Providing accommodations that are not needed circumvent the learning process by doing too much of the work for a student and results in denial of benefit or opportunity to learn.”  
Sherman v. Mamaroneck Union Free School District,  
340 F.3d 87 (2<sup>nd</sup> Cir. 2003)
- Identification of child as being disabled when no disability exists is violation under Section 504.

### Slow Learner Defined:

A “slow learner” is described as a student with low average IQ who appears to be functioning at the best of his/her ability. Working at their capacity, this student may be one or two grade levels behind and “at-risk” for repeatedly failing the state assessment test. This student usually has no severe discrepancies under the LD classification and may be performing at or slightly above their ability or IQ.

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FAQ Parents ask about Struggling (Slow) Learners By Erin N. King, Ed.S., Nationally Certified School Psychologist

*What does it mean to be a struggling learner or slow learner?*

A “slow learner” is not a diagnostic category, it is a term people use to describe a student who has the ability to learn necessary academic skills, but at rate and depth below average same age peers. In order to grasp new concepts, a slow learner needs more time, more repetition, and often more resources from teachers to be successful. Reasoning skills are typically delayed, which makes new concepts difficult to learn. A slow learner has traditionally been identified as anyone with a Full Scale IQ one standard deviation below the mean but not as low as two standard deviations below the mean. If a cognitive assessment (IQ test) has a mean (average) of 100, we expect most students will fall within one standard deviation of 100. That means that most students have an IQ of 85 to 115. Those who fall two standard deviations below the mean are often identified as having an [Intellectual Disability](#) (IQ below 70). A slow learner does not meet criteria for an Intellectual Disability (also called mental retardation). However, she learns slower than average students and will need additional help to succeed.

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*What are some of the challenges educationally for struggling or slow learners?*

Typically, a slow learner has difficulty with higher order thinking or reasoning skills. This suggests that it will be more challenging to learn new concepts. New skills need to be based upon already mastered concepts. This can be difficult when the majority of the class has already mastered a concept and is moving on, while the slow learner needs more time. This can lead to gaps in knowledge and basic skills. The more gaps in a content area, the more challenging it is for anyone to learn new concepts. It’s also important to recognize that these students are typically keenly aware they are struggling and self confidence can be an issue. They are prone to anxiety, low self image,

and eventually may be quick to give up. They often feel “stupid” and start hating school. They spend all day doing something that is difficult for them, it can be very draining. Finding other activities that the student can be successful in is very important. There should be emphasis on strengths as well.

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### Slow Learner vs. Disability – Issue of Unexpectedness

The §504 committee will examine the student’s data to determine whether the difficulties are **unexpected** for the student in relation to the student’s other cognitive abilities (the ability to learn in the absence of print) and **unexpected** in relation to the provision of effective classroom instruction.

- Does student exhibit age-appropriate oral language skills, including listening comprehension, etc?
- Does student exhibit age-appropriate reading comprehension even though word reading skills in isolation are deficient?
- Is student’s ability to learn in subject that are not as heavily reliant on reading, such as social studies, science and math, grade-appropriate?
- Is student’s ability to comprehend information read to him age appropriate?
- If student were not asked to read or interact with print, would he appear to be age/grade-appropriate?
- Is there data to support a student’s lack of progress despite having received research-based intervention?
- Is student’s lack of progress due to socio-cultural factors, such as language differences, irregular attendance, or lack of experiential background?

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**What's the Difference -- Slow Learner or Learning Disabled?**  
by Karen Mackay, SPELD Education Advisor  
published in the SPELD SA SPRING 2001 newsletter

Why is it so important to be able to identify the slow learners in a class as opposed to those children with specific learning disabilities? After all, we have had the ill effects of labeling stressed on us ad nauseam. Everybody knows the old self-fulfilling prophecy experiments from college days. What you expect to get is exactly what you will get. Social justice and inclusive curriculum advances have also contributed to our awareness and sometimes even our wariness of special needs kids. What then can be possible benefits of identifying these two quite specific groups?

There is only ever one justification to labeling a child with a specific tag. That is to ensure that the level of service and support provided to that child is markedly improved. As the learning needs of these two groups are quite different, it is important to make correct identification for programming needs.

#### Definitions

**A slow learner** is a child of below average intelligence, whose thinking skills have developed significantly more slowly than the norm for his/her age. This child will go through the same basic developmental stages as other children, but will do so at a significantly slower rate. However, this development, while being slower, nevertheless be relatively even.

On the other hand, a child with **specific learning disability** is one of average or above average intelligence who has specific difficulties which can make learning very difficult. There may be deficits in any of the basic central nervous

system functions, which have to do with the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning or mathematical abilities ie attention, memory, language, auditory and visual perception, motor coordination and planning, spatial orientation, impulse control and sequencing. In short, if there is a discrepancy between the child's potential and actual achievement.

## Characteristics

### Slow Learner

#### **1. Developmental**

-- may have immature language patterns or speech problems

#### **2. Social**

-- poor judgment, immature social behavior, prefers company of younger children

#### **3. Personal**

-- frustration, aggression, anxiety

#### **4. Academic**

-- may show proficiency with particular tasks rather than a subject areas, poor memory, difficulties understanding several steps in a task

#### **5. Learning**

-- needs to have new information linked to old, difficulties transferring information learned in one situation to other situations.

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Patterns of Learning Disorders by David Wodrich and Ara J. Schmitt, pg. 48

Criteria for Slow Learner:

1. Full Scale IQ is less than or equal to 85 or both the Verbal Comprehension Index (VCI) and the Perceptual Reasoning Index (PRI) is less than 85.  
VCI is a measure of verbal concept formation. It assesses child's ability to listen to a question, draw upon learned information from both formal and informal education, reason through an answer, and express their thoughts aloud. It is a good predictor of readiness for school and achievement orientation, but can be influenced by background education and/or cultural opportunities. Accounts for 62% of variance in "g".  
PRI is a measure of non-verbal and fluid reasoning. It assesses child's ability to examine a problem, draw upon visual motor and visual spatial skills, organize their thoughts, create solutions, and then test them. Accounts for 45% of variance in "g".
2. No VCI or PRI discrepancy expected.
3. Most academic test scores statistically concomitant with Full Scale IQ.
4. Primary deficit is NOT listed (i.e. specific language impairment, phonological reading disorder, nonverbal learning disability, graphomotor underproduction, or inconsistent performance with splinter skills)
5. Rule out mild mental retardation (IQ less than or equal to 70)

Common Presentation of Slow Learner:

1. Frequent concern of teacher at time of referral – "failing all subjects; not keeping up with classmates"
2. Typical grade of referral – primary grades
3. Gender ratio roughly equal boys and girls

4. Prevalence in referred sample – very common

National Prevalence Rate – 14% of school aged children – pg. 53 (Shaw, 1999)