What Does It Mean to Have Learning Disabilities in Alberta?

CHILDREN 6 TO 15

Children with learning disabilities can face unique challenges both in the school system and with their peers and families. They are also finding strategies to deal with their diagnosis.

The data in this section were taken from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY). The NLSCY is an ongoing longitudinal survey that focuses on monitoring the development and well-being of Canadian children from infancy to adulthood. The NLSCY began following a representative sample of Canadian children from birth to 11 years of age in 1994. A follow-up survey is conducted every two years. Four different groups of children were selected at different ages in different years; these children remain in the survey for a predetermined period of time. Up to two children per household were surveyed. The NLSCY longitudinal samples were taken from Labour Force Survey respondent households. The one-year-olds in the third group and the five-year-olds in the fourth group were selected from the Birth Register.

Please note that the age groups referred to in this section will vary according to the group from which the data were collected.

HOW MANY CHILDREN HAVE LEARNING DISABILITIES?

Of those children aged 6 to 15, more than 5 in 100 (5.5%) had a learning disability according to the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY).

WHAT IS THE IMPACT ON HEALTH?

Among children aged 6 and 7 with learning disabilities, 67.5% had had an ear infection since birth; this figure was lower at 22.4% among the non-disabled population aged 6 and 7.

Among children aged 6 to 15 with learning disabilities, 26.4% had allergies that were diagnosed by a health professional. The percentage was lower (15.4%) among the non-disabled population aged 6 to 15.

Parents or guardians were asked if their children (aged 6 to 15) had emotional, psychological or nervous difficulties that have been diagnosed by a health professional. 8.6% of parents or guardians of children with learning disabilities said this was the case; the figure was significantly lower for non-disabled children at 1.0%.

Parents or guardians reported that less than half (42.1%) of children aged 6 to 15 with learning disabilities had excellent health. Among the non-disabled population aged 6 to 15, parents or guardians reported that 63.7% had excellent health.

WHAT IS THE IMPACT ON THE FAMILY?

Thoughts from the Focus Groups

I'm $45,000 in debt because I've had to pay for additional services for 10 years. We have to pay the equivalent of a year of university education each year that our children are in school

By the time my son was in grade two, the tantrums were starting. It was becoming way too much for him. There would be two to three hours of tantrums every night. I had to stop working full-time because I couldn't deal with the stress.

What the Data Tell Us

A slightly higher percentage of children aged 6 to 15 — both those with learning disabilities and those in the non-disabled population — lived in a family that was below the low-income cut-off. The figures were 13.4% for children with learning disabilities and 13.0% for the non-disabled population.

According to the *2001 Census Dictionary*, the **low-income cut-off** is defined as the income level at which families or unattached individuals spend 20% more than the average on necessities (i.e., food, shelter and clothing).

Just over one-third (34.5%) of children with learning disabilities aged 6 to 15 had at least one parent or guardian who was currently working for pay or profit. The figure was slightly higher (37.3%) among the non-disabled population.

Among children aged 6 to 15 with learning disabilities, just over one-quarter of them (25.3%) lived with a single parent. This figure was lower among the non-disabled population aged 6 to 15 at 16.4%.

Parents of children aged 6 to 15 were asked if they experience depressive symptoms (e.g., “I felt that I could not shake off the blues even with help from my family or friends,” “I had trouble keeping my mind on what I was doing,” “I felt that everything I did was an effort,” “I had crying spells”). 19.0% of parents of children with learning disabilities said they experienced no depressive symptoms; this figure was higher for parents of children without disabilities (19.5%).

WHAT IS THE IMPACT AT SCHOOL?

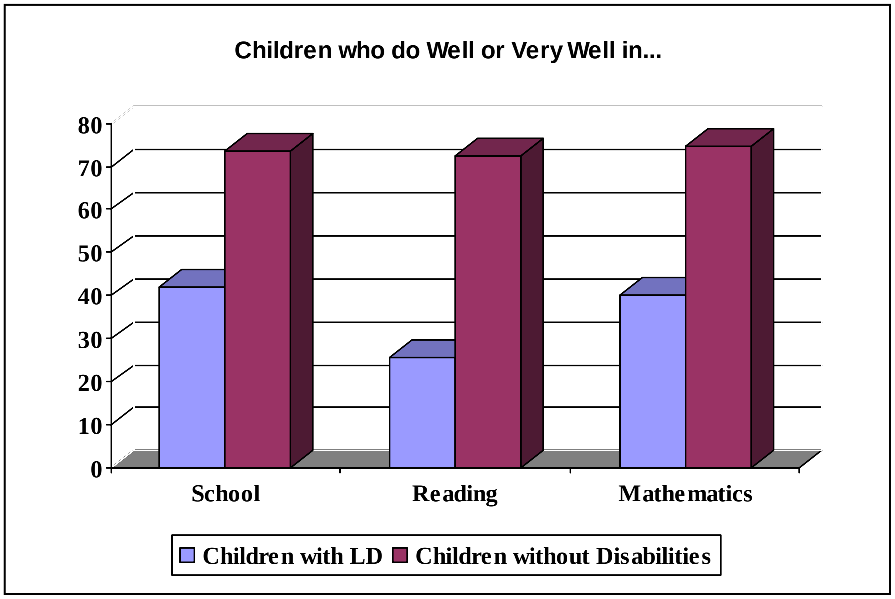
Thoughts from the Focus Groups

I can’t just read something and know how to do it; I need someone to show me how to do it. I’d rather tell someone about something than have to write it down.

Throughout school, you’re trying to hold your kids together. The focus in school is on the 20% that isn’t working well, not on the 80% that is. That’s why there’s the frustration. I kept trying to see how he would be as an adult out of the school system. I tried to focus on that.

What the Data Tell Us

Parents or guardians were asked to report on how well their child was doing in various aspects of schooling. The results for children aged 6 to 15 with learning disabilities were markedly different than those for children without disabilities. Over one-third of parents of children with learning disabilities reported that their children were doing well or very well in



school (42.0%) and just over one-quarter said they were doing well or very well in reading (25.6%). The figures were 73.5% and 72.4%, respectively, for the non-disabled population aged 6 to 15. The differences between the percentages were similar when parents were asked who their children were doing in mathematics. 40.3% of parents of children aged 6 to 15 with learning disabilities reported that their children were doing well or very well in mathematics, as compared to 74.7% of parents of children in the non-disabled population.

Parents or guardians reported that almost four times as many children aged 6 to 15 with learning disabilities reported that their child had missed more than 7 days of school since the fall than their peers in the non-disabled population. The figures were 18.2% and 5.8% respectively.

There was a difference in the percentages of children who hoped to complete college, university or more. For children aged 12 to 15 with learning disabilities, the figure was 65.7%, while the figure was 89.9% for children aged 12 to 15 in the non-disabled population.

The difference in the percentages was less marked when parents or guardians were asked if they hoped that their child would go on to university or college. 89.9% of parents or guardians of children aged 6 to 15 with learning disabilities reported that they hoped their child would go on to university or college. The figure was slightly lower at 86.2% for children aged 6 to 15 in the non-disabled population.

WHAT IS THE IMPACT ON PERSONAL/SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS?

Thoughts from the Focus Groups

His self-esteem is very low. This is the first time that he has a best friend who does not have a learning disability. He felt that he could only hand around with children with learning disabilities.

His biggest problem going through school is the fear of failing in front of the other children.

What the Data Tell Us

Children aged 10 to 15 were asked to comment on the following statements about friends:

- I have many friends.
- I get along easily with other my age.
- Others my age want me to be their friend.

- Most others my age like me.

70.9% of children aged 10 to 15 with learning disabilities answered that these statements were either “true” or “mostly true.” This figure was higher than what was reported by the non-disabled population aged 10 to 15; the figure for this group was 67.0%.

Parents of guardians were asked to respond to six statements about their child’s aggressive behaviour:

- Gets into many fights
- When another child accidentally hurts him/her, he/she reacts with anger and fighting
- Physically attacks people
- Threatens people
- Is cruel, bullies or is mean to others
- Kicks, bites, hits other children

47.0% of parents or guardians of children aged 6 to 11 with learning disabilities said that these statements were not true for their child. The figure was lower for parents or guardians of the non-disabled population at 39.6%.

Children aged 10 to 15 were also asked to rate if the above statements about aggressive behaviour were true or not true for them. 53.0% of children with learning disabilities said that the statements were not true for them. The figure was lower for non-disabled children at 46.0%.

Children aged 10 to 15 were asked about whether or not they had ever been questioned by police about something they did. 19.6% of children with learning disabilities said that they had been questioned by police at least once; the figure was 6.7% for the non-disabled population.

The data in this section were taken from the 2001 Participation and Activity Limitation Survey (PALS). PALS was a cross-sectional survey (a survey that was only done once) that was focused on disability. The PALS sample was selected from those people who answered "yes" to one or more of the disability questions on the 2001 Census of Population long questionnaire.

Please note that, in PALS, the population with learning disabilities may include individuals who have both learning disabilities and other types of disabilities.

In addition, PALS only includes data for children with disabilities. The PACFOLD Research Committee decided not to use the population with other types of disabilities as a comparative population.

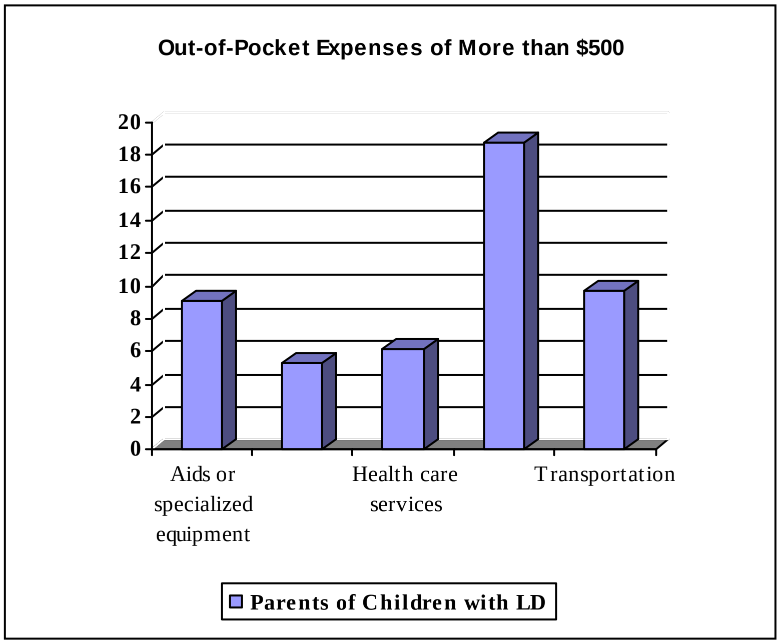
WHAT IS THE IMPACT ON THE FAMILY?

Thoughts from the Focus Groups

With the amount of money I've spent, I probably could have bought a house.

I paid a tutor to do extra work with her, but I had to stop because I couldn't afford it.

What the Data Tell Us



Parents and guardians were asked about the amount of out-of-pocket expenses they had to pay for aids and specialized equipment for their children. Among parents and guardians of children aged 6 to 14 with learning disabilities, 84.7% said that they had no out-of-pocket expenses for aids or specialized equipment and 9.1% said that their out-of-pocket expenses were more than $500.

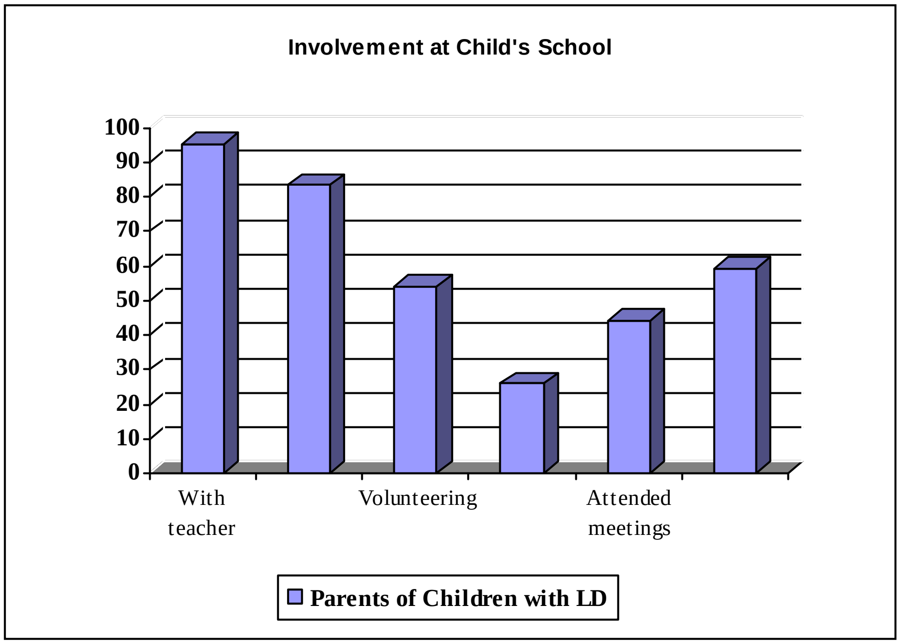
Similarly, parents and guardians were asked about the amount of out-of-pocket expenses they had to pay for help with everyday activities. 91.7% of parents and guardians of children aged 6 to 14 with learning disabilities reported that they had no out-of-pocket expenses, while 5.3% said that their out-of-pocket expenses were more than $500.

84.0% of parents and guardians of children aged 6 to 14 with learning disabilities said that they had no out-of-pocket expenses for health care services and 6.2% said that they spent more than $500.

In terms of out-of-pocket expenses for medication, more than half (59.4%) of parents or guardians of children aged 6 to 14 with learning disabilities said they had no out-of-pocket expenses. 18.7% said their out-of-pocket expenses were more than $500.

Parents and guardians were also asked about out-of-pocket expense for transportation. 75.7% of those individuals with children aged 6 to 14 with learning disabilities said they had no out-of-pocket expenses, while 9.7% said they had out-of-pocket expenses of more than $500

Just over two-thirds (64.7%) of parents of children aged 6 to 14 with learning disabilities said that they or their spouse checked homework or helped with homework during the past year.



Parents of children aged 6 to 14 with learning disabilities were also asked about their involvement in their child's school life. Almost all of these parents (95.1%) said that they had spoken to, visited or corresponded with their child's teacher in the last school year. Over three-quarters (83.4%) said that they had attended a school event in which their child participated (e.g. play, sports competition, science fair) during the last school year. Fewer parents said that they had volunteered in their child's class or helped with a class trip (54.0%) or helped in the school (such as in the library or computer room) (25.8%). Less than half (44.1%) of parents of children aged 6 to 14 with learning disabilities said that they had attended a parent-school, parent advisory committee or parent council meeting and 59.4% said that they had raised funds for the school.

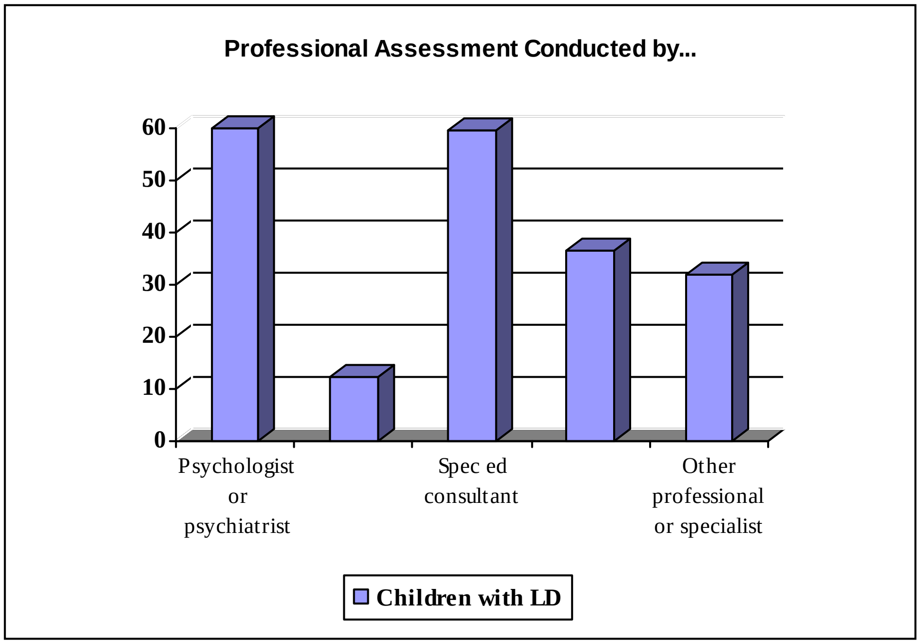
WHAT IS THE IMPACT AT SCHOOL?

Thoughts from the Focus Group

Our kids are like the canaries that they used to send into the mines. They are sensitive, so they can tell us about the real state of the education system.

A lot of time is spent having to educate the teachers. You get a new teacher every year, and you have to start over from scratch.

What the Data Tell Us



Slightly less than two-thirds (65.8%) of parents or guardians of children with learning disabilities aged 6 to 14 said that a professional assessment had been done to determine their child's educational needs. The parents or guardians whose children had had assessments were then asked who had done the assessments. Over half (59.9%) said that the assessment had been done by a psychologist or psychiatrist. In addition, 12.3% had been done by a social worker, 59.3% had been done by a special education consultant, 36.6% had been done by a speech or language therapist, and 32.0% had been done by some type of other professional or specialist.

Parents and guardians of children aged 6 to 14 with learning disabilities were also asked about their child's use of aids, specialized equipment or services to help with their learning disability. Over one-third (42.2%) of these children with learning disabilities used these types of aids, equipment or services. 23.5% of parents said that their children needed these types of aids, equipment or services but did not have them.

Among those children aged 6 to 14 with learning disabilities who did use aids, specialized equipment or services to help with their learning disability, 50.6% used a computer as a learning aid, 43.1% used a tutor, 13.3% used recording equipment, 12.0% used talking books and 1.4% used voice activated or voice synthesis computer software.

Among those children aged 6 to 14 with learning disabilities who needed aids, equipment or services that they did not have, 41.8% needed a tutor and 15.1% needed a computer as a learning aid.

WHAT IS THE IMPACT ON PERSONAL/SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS?

Thoughts from the Focus Groups

School doesn't hold up a mirror that lets them see themselves. They see only the stuff that doesn't fit. Their heart breaks. I just had to tell him that he's special and that he's worth it.

What the Data Tell Us

When asked about whether their child's learning disabilities reduce the amount or kind of activities that he/she can do, 39.3% of parents or guardians of children aged 6 to 14 said that the activities were sometimes reduced and 17.8% said that activities were often or always reduced. 40.3% of parents or guardians said that activities were not reduced.

Parents or guardians who had said that their child's activities were reduced were asked about the type of activities that were reduced. 38.1% said that activities were reduced at school, 18.4% said that play or recreational activities were reduced, and 15.1% said that activities were reduced at home.