

Nonverbal learning disabilities

Read answers to some of the most common questions about this well-publicized -- but somewhat controversial -- disorder.

By Anastasia Hubbard, M.S., Brenda Smith Myles, Ph.D.

-  [Print](#)
-  [Email](#)

Locating consistent, reliable information about nonverbal learning disabilities (often referred to as NLD or NVLD) is a challenge for parents because it has yet to be clearly defined and accepted by many educators and other professionals as a distinct disorder. Nevertheless, parents often seek information about this often-publicized and somewhat controversial disorder. In this article, we will answer some of the most common questions parents ask about nonverbal learning disabilities.

What is nonverbal learning disability (NLD)? Is it a distinct diagnostic category?

Nonverbal learning disability (NLD) is believed by some to be a neuropsychological disability. Although it has been studied for the past 30 years (by Byron Rourke, Ph.D. and others), it has not yet been included as a diagnostic category in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th Edition, Text Revision (DSM-IV TR). Many characteristics associated with NLD are similar to those that describe other, more "established" disorders, such as Asperger's Syndrome and specific learning disabilities.

For a professional's perspective on NLD, we turned to [Brenda Smith Myles, Ph.D.](#), an associate professor at the University of Kansas and editor of *Intervention in School and Clinic*, a practitioner-oriented journal designed to provide practical, research-based ideas to educators who work with students with severe learning disabilities and emotional/behavior problems. Dr. Smith Myles says, "Additional research and better diagnostic tools are required to clearly define the characteristics of NLD and determine whether or not it can be considered a distinct disorder."

For the time being, let's review how this disorder is defined - and how it might apply to your child.

What characteristics are associated with NLD?

NLD is usually defined by a **distinct pattern of specific strengths and difficulties**.

Individuals thought to have NLD typically demonstrate strengths in the following areas:

- **Intelligence quotient (IQ)** which is typically in the average to above-average range. Children with NLD tend to have **verbal IQ scores** that are higher than their performance scores, a factor that distinguishes them from kids with language-based learning disabilities such as dyslexia.
- **Rote verbal and expressive and receptive language skills**, such as the ability to memorize and repeat a great deal of information presented to them in spoken form. They also exhibit early language development.
- **Auditory processing skills**, which entail learning better through **hearing** information, rather than seeing it (visual processing)

Individuals thought to have NLD generally experience difficulties in several broad categories:

- **Motor skills**, such as graphomotor skills (related to printing and cursive writing), physical coordination, and balance
- **Complex conceptual skills** involved in problem-solving, understanding cause-effect relationships, and seeing the "big picture" versus focusing on details
- **Visual-spatial-organizational skills**, such as visualizing information and understanding spatial relations
- **Social skills**, such as using and understanding nonverbal communication (e.g., gestures, facial expressions), dealing with new information and situations, transitioning between situations, conversation skills, and understanding the nuances of spoken language (e.g., hidden meanings, figurative language)
- **Activity level**: hyperactivity (when younger), and hypoactivity (as they grow older)¹

<http://www.greatschools.org/special-education/LD-ADHD/nonverbal-learning-disabilities.gs?content=907>