

Let's Talk About...

Learning disorder: Nonverbal

Children who have medical conditions that affect brain function may have a nonverbal learning disorder.

What is a nonverbal learning disorder?

A nonverbal learning disorder, also known as NVLD, is a learning problem where your child may not notice nonverbal cues. These include:

- Facial expressions
- Eye contact
- Tone of voice
- Gestures
- Body language

Unlike children with language-based learning disabilities, children with nonverbal learning disorders can often speak well. They may have problems understanding unspoken messages, fitting in, and making friends. They may also have trouble with reading comprehension, physical coordination, math, and writing.

What causes nonverbal learning disorders?

No one knows exactly what causes nonverbal learning disorders, but they may be caused by problems in the brain's frontal lobe, which is in charge of planning and remembering. Nonverbal learning disorders may also happen if the brain can't send signals to both its left and right sides.

What are the signs of a nonverbal learning disorder?

Signs of a nonverbal learning disorder may include problems with:

- Recognizing shapes, finding objects in a picture, or following a map
- Understanding and remembering what they've read
- Understanding spoken instructions
- Writing neatly, typing, copying designs on paper



- Putting puzzles together and cutting with scissors
- Being quick and accurate at math, especially word problems and graphs
- Remembering things they saw or heard during school
- Standing too close to another person and misunderstanding sarcasm or body language

What skills are affected by a nonverbal learning disorder?

Some of your child's developmental skills may not be as strong if they have a nonverbal learning disorder:

- **Visuospatial (viz-you-oh-SPAY-sheh) skills.** These skills require recognizing and organizing information after seeing something and then interpreting what you see. Reading and recognizing shapes are visuospatial skills.
- **Visual motor skills.** A visual motor skill is a visuospatial skill with movement, including writing, cutting, coloring, or putting a puzzle together.

- **Comprehension skills.** Your child may be good at sounding out words but have a hard time understanding them when reading or listening.
- **Organizational skills.** Your child may have trouble keeping books, materials, and assignments organized.
- **Problem-solving and reasoning.** Your child may have trouble solving problems or understanding implied meanings. This may include following instructions, understanding why a joke is funny, or realizing the effects of their actions.
- **Social skills.** This is the way your child acts with other people. Your child may misinterpret or ignore body language. For example, they may stand too close to someone when speaking to them or not understand when they signal that they want to end a conversation.

How can I help my child with their nonverbal learning disorder?

If you think your child may have a nonverbal learning disorder, call their healthcare provider. They can do a physical examination and may refer you to a neuropsychologist (new-row-sigh-COLL-oh-jist). This is a doctor who looks at the connection between the brain and your child's behavior.

To help your child at home:

- **Prepare your child for transitions.** Kids with nonverbal learning disorders do not understand change well, so you can help your child by giving them time to process. Tell your child that you will be leaving in one hour instead of telling them you will be leaving soon.
- **Don't assume your child will understand.** Explain instructions clearly and make sure your child is looking at you and is not distracted while you are talking.
- **Let your child take a break when they seem overwhelmed.** If you notice your child is sensitive to loud noises, lots of people in one room, or even the smells in the area, help them get out of that situation. If leaving isn't an option, have noise-cancelling headphones or other distractions ready to help your child relax.
- **Avoid using sarcasm or nonverbal cues your child won't understand.** Your child may have trouble noticing your tone of voice or understanding that you are saying one thing but mean something else. Be direct and tell your child exactly what you mean. Your child may not understand a frown or raised eyebrows either, so it's important to communicate that you are upset in another way.



