

# Handy Handouts®

Free informational handouts for educators, parents, and students

## What is Nonverbal Learning Disorder?

by Lisa Priddy, MS, CCC-SLP

**Nonverbal learning disorder (NVLD)** is a type of learning disability that can affect a child’s visual-spatial, motor, and social skills. Although not listed in IDEA or the DSM-5, developing research indicates that 5% of individuals with a learning disability have difficulties that are associated with NVLD. Children with NVLD typically have average-above average intelligence skills; however, they tend to have difficulty in the following areas:

- **motor function** (balance, coordination, seem clumsy or uncoordinated)
- **visual-spatial organization** (“seeing” differences in shapes, letters, poor recall of things they have seen)
- **social skills** (understanding social cues, interpreting facial expressions and body language, understanding sarcasm)
- Reading comprehension and mathematical problem solving

Despite these weaknesses, children with NVLD tend to develop early speech, vocabulary, and auditory memory skills. Language skills appear to be intact with average phonological, morphological, and syntactical skills, although they may have only a superficial understanding of word meanings. In fact, children with NVLD might talk excessively; however, as the language demands increase in the school-age years, these children have difficulty using higher level language. Following spoken directions is often difficult because of their inability to understand abstract concepts, such as “before,” and due to poor visual memory skills.

In addition, children with NVLD struggle with pragmatic language. Sixty-five percent of communication is nonverbal, and children with NVLD have difficulty interpreting the non-verbal social cues of those around them, such as facial expressions, body language, and sarcasm. They also have a weak understanding of non-literal language, such as idioms (e.g. “She has butterflies in her stomach”) and metaphors.

Most children with NVLD respond positively to supportive and highly structured learning environments. The following are suggestions for parents, therapists, and teachers when working with children with NVLD:



1. Most importantly, provide children with NVLD with a warm and supportive learning environment to encourage positive learning experiences.
2. Break tasks into small parts and provide step-by-step directions.



# Handy Handouts®

Free informational handouts for educators, parents, and students  
(cont.)



3. Encourage children to repeat important information or directions aloud to ensure they understood the information presented.



4. Teach children how to recognize emotions, facial expressions, and body language. Encourage students to engage in role playing activities to “act out” certain emotions and situations.



5. Group alike items together and talk about the shape, size, and color of the objects.



6. Point out the similarities and differences among common objects to improve critical thinking skills.



7. Read books aloud with children and ask them questions about the characters, setting, and encourage them to predict what will happen next in the story.



8. For children who can read, provide written outlines that are clear and not visually distracting. Written outlines reduce the frustration of taking notes or copying information from the board.

Resources:

Non-verbal learning disabilities. Learning Disabilities Association of America. Accessed 5/22/23 from <https://daamerica.org/disabilities/non-verbal-learning-disabilities/>

Nonverbal learning disorder. Psychology Today. Accessed 5/22/23 from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/conditions/nonverbal-learning-disorder>

Quick Guide to Non-Verbal Learning Disorder. (2023). Child Mind Institute. Accessed 5/22/23 from <https://childmind.org/guide/quick-guide-to-non-verbal-learning-disorder-nvld/>

Volden, Joanne (2002). Nonverbal Learning Disability: What the SLP Needs to Know. ASHA Leader, 7 (19), 4-5. Accessed 5/22/23 from <https://doi.org/10.1044/leader.FTR1.07192002.4>

What is nonverbal learning disorder? Churchill Center & School, accessed 5/22/23 from [https://www.churchillstl.org/learning-disability-resources/nonverbal-learning-disorder/#:~:text=Nonverbal%20learning%20disorder%20\(NVLD\)%20is,and%20comprehension%20of%20abstract%20concepts](https://www.churchillstl.org/learning-disability-resources/nonverbal-learning-disorder/#:~:text=Nonverbal%20learning%20disorder%20(NVLD)%20is,and%20comprehension%20of%20abstract%20concepts)

**Related Handy Handouts®:**

[105–Parents Help to Encourage Social Success at Home, Too!](#)

[366–Developing Students’ Social Skills through Scripting](#)

[151–Encouraging Students to Use Good Social Skills at School and at Home](#)

For more FREE Handy Handouts®, go to [www.handyhandouts.com](http://www.handyhandouts.com)