

## TIP SHEET: Nonverbal Learning Disabilities

### What is a Nonverbal Learning Disability?

Nonverbal Learning Disabilities (NLD), like all learning disabilities (LD), are brain-based problems that affect one or more ways that a person takes in, stores or uses information. LDs can interfere with learning basic skills such as reading, writing, and math. They can also interfere with higher level skills such as organization, time management and social skills. People with LDs are intelligent and have abilities to learn despite difficulties in processing information.

People with nonverbal learning disabilities have relatively *strong verbal skills*, while their *nonverbal skills are weak*.

Nonverbal Learning Disability is a type of learning disability that has been studied much less than others, such as reading disabilities. It is often shortened to NLD, or NVLD. Sometimes the term “Visuospatial Learning Disability” (VSLD) is used instead of NLD. There is still a lot to learn about NLDs: how they work and how to best help the people who have them.

### What Does NLD affect?

People with NLD often have strengths in:

- **Verbal Intelligence:** analyzing information and solving problems using language based reasoning
- **Verbal Skills:** understanding what is said and expressing ideas
- **Phonological Processing:** identifying and manipulating speech sounds
- **Memory Retrieval:** recalling information from memory

People with NLD struggle in one or more of the following areas:

- **Visual-spatial skills:** perceiving patterns and/or understanding how things fit together in time and in space
- **Social and emotional skills:** processing complex or novel information and/or figuring out the meaning
- **Organizational skills:** figuring out how to arrange things and/or breaking tasks down into component parts and combining parts to make the whole
- **Motor skills:** coordinating movements (e.g., physical awkwardness, writing problems)

- **Social and emotional skills:** processing complex or novel information and/or figuring out the meaning of the actions, the nonverbal behaviour and the emotions of others
- **Adjusting to novelty or transitions:** moving from one task to another and/or adjusting to a change in routine

For people with NLD these challenges often lead to problems in social judgment and social interaction. The specific effects vary depending on the individual. Some daily challenges may include:

- Finding their way around a school or a neighbourhood
- Remembering where they put things or how to find them
- Tidying a room, notebook or knapsack
- Playing in group: what is fair, what is socially acceptable to say or do, how to appropriately enter and continue a conversation
- Adjusting to changes in routine or grasping a change in rules or way of completing tasks

#### **What may be causing difficult behaviours?**

A child with NLD may have “meltdowns” or detach him/herself by “spacing out” because she is overloaded by trying to work through situations that other children learn to handle with much less effort. For example, she may avoid or react angrily to any sort of novelty because she is not able to quickly and accurately understand the new situation.

A child with NLD may talk incessantly. This may be because he relies heavily on his well-developed language skills to interact with others and to cope with confusion and anxiety.

Social problems frequently occur because children with NLD struggle with the parts of communication that take place without words, such as the idea of personal space, or the signals that other people use to convey irritation, anxiety, etc.

Often a child may not understand the give and take of play and of conversation. She may be unaware that the listener is bored. She may make inappropriate comments and then be bewildered when others become upset, because she does not understand the social rules.

A child with NLD may try to control play in order to cope with his uncertainty and anxiety.

#### **What can caregivers and teachers do?**

**Learn as much as they can about NLD and how it affects their own child.** This will help them to understand the meaning of the child’s behaviour and to set realistic expectations for him or her.

**Recognize that uncooperative behaviour may be the result of feeling confused, anxious and overwhelmed.**

**Give the child verbal direction and instruction.** Use the child's strength with language to help him learn what others observe and learn more easily. Teach her such details as what is expected in different social, family, and school situations; how others feel; how to organize and carry out tasks, etc. This direct teaching may have to be repeated several times before the child is able to master the skill. It is important to provide this instruction with kindness and patience.

**Manage the environment.** Children with NLD need predictable schedules as much as possible. They need preparation for changes in routines and to be given notice that they are about to be asked to make a transition in activities. They need advance planning and instruction about unfamiliar tasks and situations.