A child might be diagnosed with a disorder of written expression when his or her written abilities are far below his or her cognitive abilities, or IQ. The difficulties may involve spelling, grammar, or an overall ability to communicate in writing.

Why it matters: Writing is one of the hardest skills for a child to master because it requires multiple steps and multiple skills. A child must organize his or her thoughts, keep track of what he or she wants to say, remember how to spell each word, and keep track of grammar (capitalization, commas, periods, correct verb tense, etc.). As children get older, teachers often expect more and more writing – not just for language arts and spelling, but for social studies, science, and other subjects. Children are often asked to express their thoughts and ideas in writing and answer questions that require a sentence, paragraph, or even an essay to show what they have learned. Homework and worksheets also require writing. In the more advanced grades, it is expected that children will be able to take notes. Clearly, difficulties with written expression can impact a child in all subjects in school. Socially, with the increased use of email, texting, and other social media, written expression is taking a greater role.

How is it diagnosed: Sometimes children are tested by a professional at school, and at other times children are tested by a professional outside of school. These evaluators are conducting either psycho-educational assessments or neuropsychological assessments. The child’s general abilities or intelligence will be tested (called IQ testing). These evaluations compare the child’s performance to others his or her same age. Then the child will have additional testing specific to written expression. When there is a large gap between the IQ scores and the written expression scores that is not better explained by other factors, such as attention and language, the child might be diagnosed with a disorder of written expression. The testing will reveal specific weaknesses, for example, spelling,
grammar, and/or organizational aspects of writing.

*Treatment and accommodations:* Because specific areas of difficulty can vary from child to child, treatments and accommodations can vary too. For example, one way to help a child with difficulties with the organizational aspects and structure of writing is to use a graphic organizer. Additionally, some children benefit from having a scribe (someone who physically writes down the child’s spoken answers), using a computer, having extra time when taking tests, or completing writing assignments in an environment where they can speak their thoughts aloud. Depending on the child’s needs, a speech-language therapist, special education teacher, or regular education teacher may work with the child.

Also, it is sometimes helpful to have written assignments broken down into smaller parts: Monday, the assignment is to select 3 ideas. Tuesday, order the ideas, and Wednesday, write a sentence for each idea. Thursday, put the sentences into a cohesive paragraph. Friday, check for spelling. If a child is being graded on a subject outside of spelling, it might be helpful not to take off for spelling errors.

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