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Showing Acceptance of Your Child's Learning Disability

The therapist's words, Your daughter is deeply depressed, flooded one mother with heartbreak and anxiety. But it was a wake-up call that transformed her relationship with her daughter with LD.

By Carla Bach

"Your daughter is deeply depressed," said the therapist.

The words flooded me with heartbreak and anxiety. And yet, 10-year-old Catherine had AD/HD and [learning disabilities](#) and was behind most children her age in developing social and thinking skills. She had endured social rejection from other kids and their taunts that she was "stupid." (She's not; her IQ is above average.) Although she had been in a school program for kids with LD, the teachers there hadn't been effective in helping her handle peer difficulties. How could Catherine *not* be depressed?

But peers weren't the big problem, the therapist told me. The main feelings Catherine revealed in several months of play therapy were about me. So we spent the hour examining how Catherine and I interacted. I knew she had become increasingly defiant and moody at home, but I thought that was normal for kids with AD/HD and LD. I didn't realize how large a part I might be playing in the problem.

As we talked, I saw that I had been increasing my demands on Catherine in her weaker areas, the ones where I saw her as being farthest behind the norm: organization, neatness, and personal appearance. And even though my intentions were good - to improve her skills in those areas - the result was that Catherine was feeling unaccepted, even unloved.

What could I do to change things? The therapist suggested I try thinking of Catherine as being a few years younger than she is. She also helped me recognize that Catherine is doing the best she can (and often actually does quite a good job). Then she suggested some specific strategies I could use to show my acceptance. Here are the ones that worked best:

- **I try to keep "that tone" out of my voice.** I worked hard to stop my immediate critical reactions to every mistake. Now when a problem arises, I explain calmly what it is and how to solve it or avoid it next time. I try to ignore minor problems.
- **I turned her room over to her.** She can let her room be a mess most of the time if she wants. She does have to pick up once a week for vacuuming and bed changing, and she does have to keep other

areas of the house picked up.

- **I help her with her chores.** When I mention a chore she needs to do, I offer to help her with some part of it - generally a small part - and she usually cooperates willingly. For example, I'll say, "The living room is a mess; you can gather up the toys, and I'll put away the books."
- **I leave the less important decisions totally up to her.** I don't comment on her hair or clothes. I don't direct her activities in her free time. If her choice is really a problem - dangerous or destructive, for example - I explain the problem calmly, and she usually makes a better choice on her own.
- **I follow up instructions or disciplinary actions with positive messages.** For example, if it's time to turn off the TV, I tell her and then add, "But you can read in bed for a while." If she is behaving badly, I give her a consequence, then add, "But you sure did a good job of getting along with your brother today." Since her attention is usually on the most recent thing that's happened, her moods are noticeably better.
- **I give her strokes, strokes, strokes!** I actively look for reasons to praise her. Anything she does well - no matter how small - gets recognition. And, just as the experts predict, she now does many more positive things in order to get those strokes.
- **I give her lots of physical contact - pats, hugs, cuddling together.** I love this child, and I want her to know it! Words may confuse her at times, but everyone understands hugs.

Within three months, Catherine and I had settled into a much better relationship, and the therapist felt she was ready to leave therapy. We still have our difficulties, of course - I don't use these strategies perfectly, and they don't always work. But overall, life has become calmer and happier for the whole family. And she even keeps her room neater!