

## **The Traffic Metaphor**

*(Taken from "Talking to Children About LD" by Ania Siwek, 2009)*

Through years of practice, I have developed a simple approach to explain LD using words that children understand and remember. Following is language that parent can use to talk to their children about LD. It is recommended for children starting in the fourth grade, but can be modified for younger children. The language used is purposely simple. Metaphors are used to describe complicated brain functioning so that children understand what an LD is and how it makes learning difficult.



### **Step 1: An explanation of how everyone learns**

Explain to the child that all learning takes place in the brain. Everything we know now and will learn in the future happens by taking in information around us.

Information gets brought into the brain through elaborate systems of specialized mechanisms traveling on pathways throughout the brain.

Instead of using the technical terms for these real systems, I prefer to talk about them as cars and highways. The brain is made up of millions of pretend highways with millions of pretend cars traveling on them super fast all the time. These cars transport information to different areas of the brain. You know what your mother's voice sounds like because that information was sent in a car to a special area in your brain that keeps that information whenever you need it.

There are many different areas in your brain and each holds different kinds of information. I call these areas in the brain garages. There are garages for information on words, numbers, feelings, and so much more. When you learn new things, it's like the information travels inside cars on highways, heading toward specific garages. Similarly, when you want to get information you learned awhile ago, it's like a car goes to that specific garage, picks up the information, and drives it on highways to take it to the place you need it.

These cars travel super fast because there are no obstacles like traffic lights or stop signs to get in their way. It can take a car less than a second to pick up information from a garage and get the information to where it needs to go. Blinking your eye takes longer!

### **Step 2: An explanation of what it means to have a learning disability**

When you have an LD some of the highways in your brain have traffic jams. Not all the highways in your brain have traffic jams, just the ones that are affected by your LD.

When cars sit in traffic jams no one knows how long it will take them to get to their final destination. Sometimes it can be a quick traffic jam and sometimes it can feel

like forever!

If you're someone with an LD, having a traffic jam on your highways to the reading, writing or math garage can feel very frustrating. Think about the last time you were stuck in a real traffic jam - maybe you were on your way to school or soccer practice or a friend's home for a play date. Was it fun to sit in traffic? Were you frustrated? angry? bored? annoyed? tired? Or you just didn't care? You probably got to where you needed to go but it just took a long time.

Traffic jams can cause a lot of problems. When you have a reading LD, trying to sound out letters on a page can take a long time. That is because there is a traffic jam going to the reading garage (where the words get stored) and the cars move very slowly. Sometimes you might confuse sounds for some letters like B and D, you might make up sounds or you might give up because you are either embarrassed or too tired to continue. When you try to do math, you might confuse the symbols so you add instead of multiply or you might line up the numbers in a subtraction problem in the wrong order and end up with the wrong answer. Even trying to tell a story can be a problem because of the traffic jams. Sometimes, you say things like "um," "one second," "that thingy," or "you know," because you can't find the right words to explain yourself.

### **Step 3: Help the child understand that their potential is limitless**

There are great challenges about having an LD. The good news is that there are tricks that special teachers or tutors can teach you to make learning easier. I call these tricks "side roads." Using side roads help your cars get to where they need to go faster.

The thing to remember, though, is that these side roads are unpredictable; sometimes they get to where they need to go super fast and sometimes they take a long time because of obstacles like traffic lights, stop signs, and children riding their bicycles. You just never know what will happen on a side road. That means that even if you use a side road when you're spelling a word, you may still make mistakes. But taking a side road is always faster than getting stuck in a traffic jam. And using a side road over and over again means that the tasks that were once hard, like spelling, get much easier and you make less mistakes. Using side roads encourages you to be creative. Maybe that's why so many successful artists, singers, athletes and business people have learning disabilities.

All the parts you need to be smart are in your brain. Nothing is missing or broken. The difference between your brain and one that doesn't have an LD is that your brain gets traffic jams on certain highways. That means that it takes your cars longer to travel to information garages. Eventually, they do get there.