



History and Background

To have a smart child who cannot learn in school: This is the paradox facing parents of children with learning disabilities (LD) and ADHD (attention deficit disorder). Because these children – as many as one in five – frequently struggle to learn reading, writing and arithmetic, and may also have trouble with attention and social skills, it is difficult for parents and teachers to understand that they are neither unintelligent nor unmotivated -- and that they also have significant strengths.

Contrary to the belief still held by many parents, teachers, and the general public, learning disabilities are not related to low intelligence, nor do they involve physical impairments. In fact, the greatest obstacle to getting these children the help they need is that, unlike a child in a wheelchair, children with learning and attention difficulties have an *invisible* handicap. Their teachers often view them as not trying hard enough, or as just not very smart. These children's self-esteem plummets when they can't keep pace with their classmates.

Unless they get the specific instruction and support they require to succeed in school, they are at serious risk: Over 18% of students with LD drop out of high school, while an additional 12% receive a certificate of completion that does not lead to higher education. One in two young adults with LD reports an encounter with the criminal justice system within eight years of leaving school, while the rate of adults with LD who are not in the work force is double that of other adults.

Most experts agree with Dr. Margie Gillis, President of LiteracyHow and research affiliate with Haskins Laboratories at Yale (and Smart Kids' Past President) that, "The best predictor of a child's success is a parent doing everything in his or her power to help that child succeed." But parents face a daunting challenge in discovering how to help their children with these complex and poorly understood difficulties.

Early on, parents may have little more than an uneasy feeling that "something is wrong." When their children are ultimately diagnosed, they are plunged into a world of fear and anxiety. And they discover that it is not easy to find help in developing the skills to advocate for their children – and to address their own sense of loss and isolation.

It took Jane Ross, a longtime publishing professional, more than 3½ years to figure out what was wrong and how to get the right help for her son with learning disabilities. After enlisting the commitment and support of Dr. Margie Gillis and other LD experts and parents who had gone

through the same anguished search for answers, she established **Smart Kids with Learning Disabilities**, a nonprofit organization based in Norwalk, CT, to help make the process easier for other parents.

Based on focus-group research revealing parents' eagerness for information on this "highly emotional" issue, and aided by a distinguished Professional Advisory Board, the organization launched in May of 2000 with the first issue of the *Smart Kids with Learning Disabilities* print newsletter. After almost 10 years producing its "user-friendly, parent-centered publication" for members in 49 states and abroad, the organization launched an extensive web resource at www.SmartKidswithLD.org, including a free e-newsletter and weekly blog.

In October 2009, Henry Winkler – the award-winning actor, director, author, and producer known to fans worldwide as The Fonz – joined **Smart Kids** as the organization's Honorary Chairman, accepting **Smart Kids' Community Service Award** in April 2009 for his children's book series, *Hank Zipzer: The World's Greatest Underachiever*, about the misadventures of a boy (much like himself) with dyslexia and ADHD.

Smart Kids offers both regional and virtual educational programs and networking support, helping parents navigate the difficulties facing these children. In 2004, it introduced the nationwide **Smart Kids with Learning Disabilities Youth Achievement Award** to celebrate the talents and accomplishments of young people. The 2020 **Fred J. Epstein Youth Achievement Award**, named in honor of the renowned pediatric neurosurgeon who spoke often about his learning disabilities, was presented on June 11 to Zachary Rice of Long Valley, NJ. Zach was diagnosed at 9 with a rare and painful bone condition that landed him in the hospital on and off for the next two years. Realizing his only source of comfort had been gaming, he made up his mind to raise money to buy gaming systems for every child's room in the hospital. Thanks to his ADHD ability to hyper-focus, the Action for Distraction 5K was launched in April, 2013 and continues to be an annual fundraising event for the Goryeb Children's Hospital. "Having ADHD means I may have to work harder," Zach says, "but doesn't mean I can't make a huge impact on the world."

The organization introduced the Countdown to Kindergarten program for preschool children in 2019, assisting parents in helping their children get ready to learn to read when they enter kindergarten.

Smart Kids with Learning Disabilities plays a unique role in providing practical, positive information and encouragement to those who, more than anyone else, determine whether children with learning disabilities will succeed—*their parents*—through emphasizing these children's strengths as well as the importance of addressing their weaknesses. As Mr. Winkler states, "There are so many children in our country today with learning challenges who really feel 'less than,' who are so afraid that they're never going to accomplish their dream. **Smart Kids** is there to say, 'You can. You will. Eventually you can be who it is you dream of being.'"