

Every Child Can Learn Podcast Episode 1: Introduction to Learning Difficulties

- **Intro**

Glades: You are listening to the Every Child Can Learn podcast. The podcast is offered to you by Backup Uganda and Brainstud. You can listen to our podcast online on our website, www.backupuganda.org, and if you are in Gulu, you can pick up the audios offline from Mega FM, Divine Video & Music Library, Highland Primary School, Gulu Prison Primary School, Gulu Town Primary School, Mary Immaculate Primary School, St Joseph's Primary School, or Christ the King Demonstration Primary School. Do you like our podcast? Feel free to share it with your family, friends and neighbors! The more people learn about learning difficulties, the better we can help our children!

- **Episode intro**

Glades: Welcome to the first episode of Every Child Can Learn, a podcast series about how to meet every child's learning needs - even if they are a little more complicated.

- **Introduce the speakers & organization**

Glades: My name is Glades and I work as the Lead Trainer at Backup Uganda. Today, I am joined by Ann. Ann, can you please introduce yourself?

Ann: Thanks Glades. My name is Ann and I work at Backup Uganda as well, as the Uganda Country Director. In today's very first episode of Every Child Can Learn, we will be taking you through a little bit of background information on Backup Uganda as an organization, also, what kind of projects we run, and what this podcast series is all about. After that, we will get to what we really love talking about: we will be introducing the concept of 'learning difficulties' to you. We will get time to talk about what all those different terms mean, like 'learning difficulties', 'learning disabilities', 'special needs', et cetera, before we talk more about which common learning difficulties exist, what could be causing them, and what you could do to help a child who is experiencing a learning difficulty. Let's get started!

Glades: Backup Uganda is an international NGO that has been active in Uganda since 2016. We started our very first project in Gulu, and that is where you can still find our office up to now. In short: we develop support for children with learning difficulties. We believe that every child can learn and that every child should be given the chance to learn. But, we don't believe that every child can and should learn at the same speed, or in the same way. Every child is unique, with their own qualities, abilities, preferences, and struggles. At Backup Uganda, we don't see that as their problem; on the contrary, we think this uniqueness among children simply reflects how unique we all are as human beings, no matter our age. If we want all children to be able to live up to their full potential, we need to acknowledge that they may need different things that lead them to that point. This means that every child has their own, individual learning needs that need to be met. We believe that the only way to meet these needs for every child, is by offering inclusive

education. Inclusive education goes beyond having children with different abilities learn together in the same school or classroom. What this means, is something we will talk about more in the upcoming episodes of this podcast.

- **Explain Backup Uganda's work**

Ann: As an organization, we work together with primary schools, primary teachers colleges and partner organizations. At the moment, most of our partner schools and PTCs are found within Gulu, but we are still very much growing, and we hope to expand to more schools and districts as well. At our partner primary schools, we introduce what we call a school-based support system for children with learning difficulties. We want to make sure that every teacher is able to recognize possible signs of learning difficulties among the children in their class, so that they can come up with effective ways to help them. Most of the time, that means redesigning specific elements of their lessons or adding something extra. Although it helps some children to get more support outside the classroom, before or after the regular lessons, we prefer adjusted activities that can be done inside the classroom, so that children don't become segregated. To make sure teachers are able to do this, we train them for a whole school year within their own school setting. We also help them practice with what they learn from us by joining them in their classrooms and sharing feedback with each other.

We also want every teacher to have someone to go to for help if they are not sure how they can help a learner best. So, we prepare administrators to assist their teachers, for example in developing what we call individualized support plans for learners who need this. We make sure that every school has a small Inclusive Education Committee that keeps all this going, so that even when we finish our training program with the school team, they can continue on their own.

Of course, none of this can happen without involving the learners' parents as well, so we organize parents meetings at our partner schools - only when we are allowed to, of course. Some of you who are listening today, may have attended one or more of these meetings, but if you haven't: in these sessions, we learn from each other. The parents who attend these meetings share with us their experience with their own children at home, while we share more about what learning difficulties are, how you could recognize signs of them in your own children, and who you could connect with for more help.

We don't just work with experienced teachers; we help prepare the next generations of teachers as well. Through our partnership with Primary Teachers Colleges, we offer the same workshops to their student teachers as we do with the established teachers at our partner primary schools. And, to make sure it doesn't stop there, we train the tutors and administrators at the PTCs as well, so that all the coming generations of teachers are able to offer children an education that truly meets their learning needs. All of our work takes place in collaboration with the different government education officials at district and national level - we work together with the Municipal and District Education Offices of Gulu, for example.

We believe that the education sector in Uganda consists of many talented, qualified professionals who have the best interest of children at heart. That is why we prefer to focus on helping them in their professional development, rather than having our team work with children directly.

We know we can't do all of this alone, so we love working together with partner organizations that have similar goals. Often, these are education-based organizations as well, who want to make sure every child in Uganda has access to quality education. Examples of some of our partner organizations are Geneva Global and Joy of Community Foundation.

- **Introduce podcast series**

Glades: As you can tell, we love interacting with everyone who is involved in children's education. We believe that if everyone would know more about children's learning needs, the difficulties they can face, and how we can tackle those, we would see an incredible change in not just our learners, but in the society at large. To get one step closer to this, we have created a series of podcasts - or basically recorded conversations - called Every Child Can Learn. The first six episodes, including this one, will tell you more about specific learning difficulties that children can experience. The episodes are available online and offline at Mega FM, Divine Video & Music Library, and Highland Primary School, Gulu Prison Primary School, Gulu Town Primary School, Mary Immaculate Primary School, St Joseph's Primary School, or Christ the King Demonstration Primary School. Please feel free to share every episode with your neighbours, your friends and your relatives, or just listen to them together - at a safe distance, of course. The Covid-19 pandemic may not let us have big, fun meetings at school, but it doesn't need to stop us from learning more about how our children learn.

- **Define learning difficulties**

Ann: So now it's time to get to the 'real deal'. We have all heard a variety of words being used when talking about children who are different from each other, so-called normal children, for a lot of different reasons. Most of us know the term 'special needs' or 'disabilities', some talk about 'slow learners', and there are many more varieties. Let's take some time to unpack these.

Let's start with the meaning of 'special needs'. The origin of the term is quite simple: as human beings, we all have needs, and most of these needs are shared, we all have them. However, because of a number of different reasons, some of us have more or different needs than the majority. This is why they are often called 'special', it simply means they are not the same as others. We could even argue that the needs themselves are not that special, but what we need to fulfill these needs can be different for some people. For example, at some point in our lives, we all need an education. For most of us - after doing the necessary things like paying fees et cetera - this means we walk into a classroom. Some of us are in a situation where walking is not an option; for example, because our legs are not functional. We still need education as much as everyone else, but we simply need something extra to get to the point of fulfilling that need. That

is an interesting point to think about: are we talking about special needs, human needs, or maybe even human rights? Also, let's remember you can have special needs, but you cannot be special needs - I have heard people say 'this child is special needs'.

If having 'special needs' means that someone needs something different than the majority, then you can already guess what it means to have 'special educational needs': needing something different than the majority, specifically in an education context. So far, it makes sense right? Now let's make it a bit more complicated: what could be the difference between 'special educational needs' and 'learning difficulties'?

The difference between these two is in the learning aspect specifically. Let's use an example: if I use a wheelchair to move around, and my classroom does not have a ramp, then that means it becomes hard for me to enter the classroom. In that case, I have a special educational need. So when I have managed to enter the classroom, does the fact that I use a wheelchair affect how I learn what the teacher is teaching me? Not necessarily. However, there are learning difficulties that do affect my learning directly, for example when it comes to my concentration in class. This affects my learning in general, not necessarily specific aspects of my learning, like reading or numeracy. These are what we call 'learning difficulties'.

Now let's take this one step further: how about learning disabilities? There are many learning difficulties, but not all of them are called learning disabilities. Actually, we usually like to say: all learning disabilities can be seen as learning difficulties, but not all learning difficulties are learning disabilities. There are disabilities that affect very specific aspects of the learning process itself. For example, there is a learning disability called dyslexia, which affects reading and writing in particular.

So, in summary: having special needs means you have needs that are not the same as for others; having special educational needs means you have needs that are different than for other people, within the education context; learning difficulties are difficulties that affect the general learning process directly; and learning disabilities are impairments in specific aspects of the learning process.

Before Glades takes us through some examples of these learning difficulties and disabilities, I want us to talk about some of the less helpful words that we use to refer to children sometimes. At Backup Uganda, we like to call them 'forbidden words', because we don't think they add anything supportive to children who are doing their best to learn within a system that doesn't always favor them. Can you guess what kind of words I am talking about, Glades?

Glades: I can think of a few. I have heard a lot of teachers and parents call children dull and stupid, especially when these children get bad grades.

Ann: Exactly! And how about being lazy? And slow? Of course, we can't tell you what words you are allowed to use and which ones you should ban from your vocabulary. But, I hope that we can make you think a little deeper the next time you consider using these words, when you are referring to a child and their learning process. Could it be that this child is facing a difficulty that you are unaware of? And will it help them to be called these negative things? Wouldn't you rather make some extra effort to find out what they are struggling with, so that you can help them improve? Let's keep in mind that children with learning difficulties often work 10 times as hard to only get half of the result that other children get. In other words: they need your encouragement and your support more than anyone.

As we continue with this episode, Glades will take us through a sample of the most common learning difficulties and some brief information about them. This is just a short introduction, we shall share all the details about each of them with you in the next episodes.

- **Explain different types of common learning difficulties**

Glades: Today, I am going to talk about 5 different types of learning difficulties and disabilities:

- dyslexia, a reading disability;
- dyscalculia, a mathematics disability;
- ADHD and ADD, difficulties that affect concentration;
- behavioral difficulties, which include a lot of different difficulties in how children act;
- and autism, a difficulty that has to do with social interaction and communication.

Let's begin with **dyslexia**; the word 'dys' comes from the word 'difficulty' in another language, and 'lexia' comes from the word 'reading'. It is a common language impairment that affects the learner's ability to understand and express meaning through words. This is usually because they struggle with the connection between the way words sound and the way they are written. As a consequence, you see difficulties with reading, writing and spelling. For example, people with dyslexia have problems with reading complex words, which affects their vocabulary growth. It is good to put in mind that not all people who are showing these characteristics are dyslexic, but if they are seen again and again, then they have to be assessed further in order to confirm the possibility of being dyslexic.

Secondly, there is **dyscalculia**; again, the word 'dys' means difficulty and 'calculia' comes from 'calculation'. Dyscalculia is a specific learning disability based on numeracy and mathematics. Learners with this difficulty may find it challenging to deal with number-related problems and to understand the difference between the mathematical symbols (like plus and minus), for example. Just like for dyslexia, we need to note that not all people who have trouble with numbers are automatically dyscalculic, it all depends on what the origin of the problem is. Some need to be followed up on their study habits or even their class attendance.

Next, we have **ADHD/ADD**; these are disorders that bring about persistent symptoms of inattention - such as forgetting and being distracted easily - and hyperactivity, which means the learner can get over active at inappropriate times, like during a lesson. In children with ADHD, you see both of these characteristics, but in children with ADD, the hyperactivity is not there, it is mostly the inattentiveness. In both of them, children's concentration disappears quickly. Let's take an example: in class, the child may be distracted by pretty much everything the other children are doing. You will see this child turned around in their seat constantly to follow what is happening, to the point that it severely affects their learning. They also tend to act before thinking, which can get them in trouble. Children with the hyperactivity element also talk excessively and may keep moving up and down. However, some children are just very stubborn and can quickly learn how to improve, that doesn't mean they have this disorder.

Then, there are difficulties we summarize as **behavioral difficulties**. At this point, these learning difficulties are noted when there are constant unacceptable habits in behavior in the learning environment. We only talk about these to be a behavioural difficulty when the learner repeatedly shows such behaviours, so that doesn't mean that if the child is stubborn on a particular day, they immediately have a behavioural difficulty - it has to be consistent over time. An example may be a child who is aggressive and does not care about the impact of their behavior on other children at all, they are not sorry for their actions. Like I said, this is what we call an 'umbrella term', there are different behavioral problems that fall in this group. Even children with ADHD can show behavioral difficulties, for example. We bring them together, because there are a number of strategies to deal with these difficulties that are somehow similar.

Lastly, we want to mention **autism**; this is defined as a developmental disorder that is seen with a variety of communication problems and social difficulties. Whenever we speak with parents or teachers of children with autism, they usually say a similar thing: these children like to isolate themselves. Although that is a common sign of autism, not all children with autism show the exact same symptoms, which can make it complicated to determine whether it is there or not. However, most signs do fall within the categories of difficulties with communication and social interaction. They may not develop all the usual social skills the same way and at the same speed, or as other children. They often repeat the same behaviors over and over again, and they may have difficulty with developing their speech. Research into the exact causes of autism is still ongoing, but we do know that it most likely originates from the brain. Again, just like for the other difficulties I mentioned, a child may show some of the signs of autism - like tending to avoid eye contact, or finding it difficult to start and maintain connections with other people - but this doesn't mean that this child automatically has autism. There could be very many reasons for a child to act a certain way. We may suspect that a child has a specific learning difficulty, but it always needs to be confirmed, or diagnosed, by a specialist, like an educational psychologist. Just like a parent or a teacher should never be the one to decide whether a child has malaria, for example - we have doctors for that - they are not the ones to diagnose a learning difficulty.

- **General causes of learning difficulties**

Ann: There are a number of general causes to different learning difficulties, although research is still ongoing about the specific causes for some of them - autism, for example, like Glades just mentioned. The common causes may include: anything that negatively affects the brain development of a child, both before birth and in early childhood; then what you inherit from your parents in terms of how your brain works; and other things that may happen to the mother during pregnancy or to the child after being born, like illnesses or accidents that affect the growth of the child's brain. This can eventually lead to a learning difficulty. We can take the causes of dyslexia as an example: this can be a difficulty that runs in the family, meaning a child's parents or even grandparents can be struggling with the same.

- **How to help children from home**

In the upcoming episodes of this podcast, we will be giving you a lot of ideas and tips on how you could help your children if they are facing a difficulty like the ones we described. For now, let's start by asking your children one by one, what specific things do you find difficult at school? Have a conversation about this without judging them, just to understand. And, if you can, please send us a text message on 0772630078 to share what they told you.

- **Closing**

Glades: Thank you for listening to our first podcast discussing how every child can learn, where we do our best to help you understand the different learning difficulties and how they can be managed well. We hope you keep track of our next episodes to get all the details on these difficulties one by one. In the next episode, we will be talking about dyslexia, so make sure you don't miss it. See you there!

- **Outro**

Glades: Thank you for listening to Every Child Can Learn. Please share your thoughts with us! Join the conversation on Facebook or send your questions to 0772630078. Do you want to learn more about Backup Uganda and stay updated about our activities? Check our website on www.backupuganda.org and follow us on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn.