



Learning Reference Sheet

February 2026

Summary	Preschool / Early Elementary School	Later Elementary School	Middle School / High School	College / Young Adulthood
Reading				
Children with Spina Bifida may have reading challenges. Many know common, or sight words, and can sound out new ones. But comprehension, or understanding what they read, can be harder. A reading problem alone is rare (about 3 in 100). Having both reading and math problems together is more common (about 26 in 100).	Children often do well with early reading. They usually know their letters, recognize common words, and can sound out made-up words. These are real strengths. Sometimes these skills can hide later challenges. As children grow, they may struggle more with understanding what they read. Teachers should watch for this, since strong basic reading does not always mean strong comprehension.	Children with Spina Bifida often stay strong in basic reading skills. They can recognize common words and sound out words, even ones that are made up. But as grades go up, reading comprehension can become harder. Many children do best when reading single sentences. Longer passages, like paragraphs or whole stories, can feel overwhelming because they require putting many ideas together.	As children move into higher grades, their word reading skills usually stay strong. They can recognize words and sound them out well. The bigger challenge often comes with understanding what the text really means. Longer passages that ask children to connect ideas, put information together, and make guesses about meaning, can be tough, even when word reading itself is easy.	Many adults with Spina Bifida remain strong at word reading. They can recognize and read words accurately. Reading comprehension, or guessing meaning or connecting ideas in longer texts, can still be harder. Even so, most adults have the reading skills needed for daily life. Stronger reading and math skills are linked to more opportunities and independence.
Math				
Math difficulties are common. Studies show that about 3 in 10 children have a math learning disability, and about 1 in 4 have challenges in both math and reading. These problems often show up early. Even when children do well in other areas, math may stay hard. Since math is important for school and daily life, noticing challenges early helps. With support, children can build stronger skills and confidence.	Children with Spina Bifida may struggle with early math, such as one-to-one counting, saying numbers in order, or matching groups by how many there are. These difficulties can show up in preschool. Even when children are learning well in other areas, math may be harder. Screening early is key. It helps parents and teachers spot children who may need extra support, so they can get help before the challenges grow bigger.	Many children can remember math facts like addition or multiplication. But they may take longer to recall them or rely on simpler tactics, such as finger counting or “counting up.” Complex steps, like subtraction with borrowing, can be harder due to attention slips or not fully learning the procedure. With practice and support, children can improve. Stronger strategies and confidence can make math feel less frustrating and more manageable.	As children move into higher grades, math gets more complex. New topics like geometry and estimation are added to what they already know. These subjects can be tough because they rely on skills that may be weaker, such as memory, organization, and picturing shapes or space. With support, children can improve. Breaking problems into smaller steps, using visuals, and regular practice can make complex math easier.	For many adults, math challenges such as problems with accuracy, speed, solving word problems, and everyday number skills may continue. These difficulties affect real-world tasks like comparing prices, knowing coin values, handling banking or budgeting, and telling time. Even when reading is strong, math can still be harder. Functional math supports independence. Adults with stronger skills often feel confident and able to



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Executive Functions

About 3 in 10 youth with Spina Bifida also have ADHD. The inattentive type—where children struggle to stay focused—is the most common. Many young people find it hard to get started on tasks. Planning and staying organized can also be difficult.

Children with Spina Bifida often do well when classrooms have clear routines. Built-in prompts and step-by-step directions help them stay on track and feel more confident with learning.

When children with Spina Bifida move into third and fourth grade, school expectations change. Instead of “learning to read,” they are now “reading to learn.” This shift places extra demands on organization and planning, and it often reveals hidden challenges with attention and executive skills.

Moving into middle school adds new organizational demands. Along with more complex schoolwork, they often have extra personal tasks—like catheterization—that they must remember to do on their own. This “remembering to remember” can be especially challenging.

Executive functioning challenges often continue into young adulthood. These difficulties should be considered carefully when planning the transition into college or work, since organization, planning, and self-management become even more important in these settings.

Processing

Children with Spina Bifida often show strength in making connections, like linking words to their definitions. At the same time, they may struggle more with putting pieces of information together into a bigger picture.

Strong skills in making connections help children build good functional language, learn categories, and develop age-appropriate word reading abilities.

In early adolescence, youths with Spina Bifida often find it harder to understand complex spoken and written language.

This is most noticeable when they need to actively build meaning and connect different sources of information, such as word definitions, past experiences, and social context.

Difficulty putting information together can affect social skills. If adolescents struggle to use past and current social experiences, it can be harder for them to understand how others are responding to them.

Many young adults with Spina Bifida report a good quality of life. At the same time, some face limits in social participation, challenges with employment, and difficulty moving into independent living.

This is why schools should address learning and processing concerns early, to better prepare youth for adulthood.