

Getting it Right in Reading – Fact Sheet number 2

Learning disability fact sheet definition of ‘learning disability’

- A learning disability is a reduced intellectual ability and difficulty with everyday activities. For example, household tasks, self-care, socialising or managing money, reading functionally or for understanding, or writing – which affects someone for their whole life, and which has been present from birth with a lasting effect on development.
- People with a learning disability tend to take longer to learn and may need support to develop new skills, understand complex information and interact with other people.
- The level of support someone needs depends on individual factors, including the severity of their learning disability. For example, someone with a mild learning disability may only need support with things like getting a job or someone with a moderate LD may be able to live independently in the community with some additional care support during the day. However, someone with a severe or profound learning disability may need full-time care and support with every aspect of their life.
- People with certain specific conditions can have a learning disability too. For example, people with Down’s syndrome or Cerebral Palsy and some less able people with autism. Some more able people with forms of autism like Asperger Syndrome may still have considerable difficulties in daily living and are still deemed to be ‘Disabled’ because of the complexity of their disability but will not be intellectually impaired in the accepted meaning of the term. Also, many more intellectually able people with Asperger Syndrome can function without additional support and live independently.
- Many people with learning disability also have additional disabilities such as physical disability and sensory impairments and may also, like anyone else, have mental health problems, high anxiety (especially in autism), dyspraxia or speech impairment.
- Learning disability is often confused with the specific learning *difficulty* dyslexia or mental health problems. Royal Mencap Society describes dyslexia as a “learning *difficulty*” because, unlike learning disability, it is specific and does not affect intellect. Mental health problems can affect anyone at any time and may be overcome with treatment and there is no associated intellectual impairment present.
- It is important to remember that with the right support, the majority people with a learning disability in the UK can lead independent lives with a degree of support.

What you could see if someone with a learning disability walks into your surgery

- They may have indistinct, unintelligible speech or speak quietly making it difficult to understand
- They may have limited attention span
- They may be unable to do complicated tasks without some supervision
- They may not be able to read, or write, or not read for meaning
- They may give one word answers to your questions
- They might seem not to be listening to you, not giving eye contact
- They could get upset or aggressive if you ask lots of questions
- They might not seem to understand what you're saying
- They could react or act slowly or only with encouragement and prompting
- They may give slow, confused or inaccurate responses
- They might only respond to part of an instruction
- They may keep repeating themselves
- They could appear chaotic and disorganised
- They may say 'yes' too easily
- They may have speech difficulties
- They could seem overly friendly or over-confident
- They may have difficulties in developing emotionally
- They could be friendly and trusting of others, unaware of dangers or inappropriate relationships
- They may be curious, uninhibited and unaware of social constraints
- They could be aggressive or quick to hit out when disturbed
- They may be talking to you, but seem not to be following the conversation
- They may keep going off the point of a conversation
- They could use set phrases and sayings e.g. "to be precise"
- They might agree with everything you say.

Many people with a learning disability will have attended a special school as a child but a few may have been included in mainstream education, at least at primary stage, with the additional help of Local Authority Special Educational Needs (SEND) funding.