

What does a Learning Disability Mean?

What does Having a Learning Disability Mean?

Around 2.5% of the general population will have a learning disability. For many parents, having a child with a learning disability can be a confusing and worrying time. This leaflet aims to provide information to aid understanding of what it means to have a learning disability.

A person with a learning disability will experience difficulties with:

Learning new information - Teaching new skills may take a long time and need many repetitions, e.g. to do up a zip, use the toilet, etc.

Generalising learning to new situations - E.g. if a child is taught how to queue in the dinner hall, they may find it hard to transfer the skill to queuing in a shop.

Abstract concepts - Imagining ideas that are not visual or concrete, e.g. time, abstract or complex words (e.g. later, soon, feelings).

Communication - Understanding and processing what is being said and expressing needs can be challenging for many people with a learning disability. Some children may use signs/symbols to communicate.

Problem solving - It can be hard to weigh up information and make informed decisions.

Official Definition

There are three core criteria for learning disability:

1. **IQ below 70** (where 100 is average).

IQ	Level of Learning Disability
50-70	Mild
35-50	Moderate
20-35	Severe

2. **Impairment in Functional Skills** (i.e. communication, daily living skills, self care, socialisation).

3. **Lifelong and present before adulthood (18).**

What Causes a Learning Disability?

For most people with learning disabilities, the underlying cause will remain unknown, which can cause frustration.

Sometimes underlying factors are found, e.g. genetic problems or problems during child birth.



Learning Disability or Learning Difficulty?

Learning Disability - Is a global impairment of cognitive functioning (e.g. Learning, problem solving) affecting overall development.

Learning Difficulty - Is generally used in educational settings to indicate difficulties with a particular aspect of learning (e.g. reading, maths, writing).

Developmental Progression

Like all children and young people, children with learning disabilities will continue to progress and learn throughout their childhood, but at a slower rate. As a child grows and develops, they learn different skills, such as taking a first step, smiling for the first time, or waving goodbye. These skills are known as developmental milestones. A child with a learning disability will not reach every milestone at the same time as other children of the same age and may never reach some milestones fully.

Typical Challenges and Dilemmas

The rate of emotional and behavioural difficulties are much higher in people with learning disabilities than in the general population. Children or young people who have a learning disability are still aware of what goes on around them. However, their ability to understand and communicate may be limited, and they can find it hard to express themselves. Speech problems can make it even harder to make other people understand their feelings and needs. Some children can become frustrated and upset. Transitions and puberty can both be particularly challenging times for individuals and families as well as, for some, feeling socially isolated.

Useful Strategies

Strategy	Rationale
Use clear communication. Generally keep instructions and sentences, short, concrete and use visual support where possible.	To ensure messages have been understood and to prevent frustration.
Avoid using abstract concepts. Use environmental cues or objects to support understanding.	Using objects and cues will help form a concrete basis for understanding.
Instructions need to be repetitive and modelled in a way that is understandable to the person.	To support learning which is likely to take longer, and account needs to be taken of individual differences.
Encourage strengths, interests and abilities.	To reinforce positive behaviour and to develop a sense of achievement and individuality.
Reward with praise as often as possible (smiling, clapping, treats etc).	This helps to encourage positive behaviours.
Be realistic in expectations and demands.	This reduces the chances of overestimating skills, which can lead to frustration.
Use a consistent approach wherever possible.	Life is therefore more predictable and it reduces the chances of mixed messages.
Use clear rules.	To aid understanding with clear and consistent messages.

Sources of Support and Opportunities

- Learning Disability CAMHS - Meets the mental health needs of children and adolescents in North Derbyshire who have a moderate or severe learning disability.
- Disabled Children's Social Workers - Co-ordinate assessments of need for children / young people, offer support to families and signpost to other services. Access via Call Derbyshire, 01629 533190.
- Paediatrician / GP - Contact for any general or specific health issues.
- Education - For special education options contact Call Derbyshire.
- DIASS - Provide independent support, 01629 533660.