

# MINIGUIDE: LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

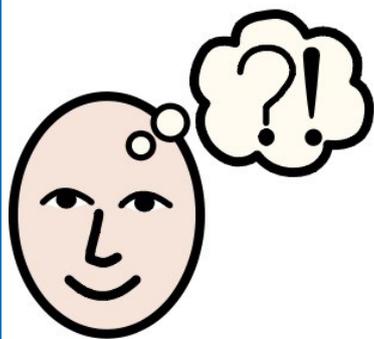
A person with a learning difficulty may find it harder, than others of their age, to understand, learn and remember new things. A learning difficulty can be diagnosed at any time. For some, a diagnosis will be made at birth or developmental differences may be noticed during early childhood. For others however, it could take many years for the learning difficulty to be identified and some may never receive a formal diagnosis. Diagnosis can often be the first step in ensuring a person receives the right support.

## Is there any difference between a Disability and Difficulty?

In adult health and social care the terms disability and difficulty are often used interchangeably. However in the educational services the term 'learning difficulty' can also include people who do not have a significant general impairment in intelligence but instead have '**specific learning difficulties**' such as dyslexia. People with a specific learning difficulty **do not have** a learning disability.

The Special Educational Needs (SEN) codes of *Mild*, *Moderate*, *Severe* and *Profound* all refer to a '**generalised learning difficulty**' of varying severity. A generalised learning difficulty is also known as a **learning disability**.

## SPECIFIC LEARNING DIFFICULTIES



The term 'Specific Learning Difficulty' (SpLD) refers to a difficulty people have with particular aspects of learning. It is an umbrella term for a number of learning differences, which affect the way information is learnt and processed, and can impact on literacy, memory, coordination, and the manipulation of letters and numbers.

The most common SpLDs are dyslexia, dyspraxia, attention deficit *disorder* (ADD), attention deficit hyperactivity *disorder* (ADHD), dyscalculia and dysgraphia.

<http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/educator/what-are-specific-learning-difficulties>

## GENERALISED LEARNING DIFFICULTY (LEARNING DISABILITY)

There are generally three criteria that must be met before a learning disability can be identified or diagnosed. These are:

- **A significantly reduced ability to understand new or complex information or to learn new skills;**
- **A reduced ability to cope independently;**
- **An impairment that started before adulthood, with a lasting effect on development.**

The term 'Generalised Learning Difficulty' is used to describe an extremely varied group of individuals, each with different strengths and capabilities as well as needs. In order to categorise this wide range of abilities the terms *profound*, *severe*, *moderate* and *mild* are often used to describe people with learning disabilities. These terms are used to describe the level of ability a person may have and are based on the idea that there is a continuum of learning ability with impairment ranging from profound to mild.



Whilst the identified level of learning disability should be used as a guide, each individual's learning ability and attainment will be different and with the right support all individuals can learn new skills to enable them to live a full and meaningful life. The focus should always be on the individual rather than the label.

## Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties PMLD

People with PMLD have a severe intellectual disability (an IQ of less than 20), often combined with other significant problems and complex needs. These may include physical disabilities, sensory impairment and severe medical needs. They have considerable difficulty communicating and have very limited understanding. They may use gesture, eye pointing, symbols or very simple language, although some may never reach the level of intentional communication and so require others to interpret their reactions.

People with PMLD require a high level of support, both for their learning needs and throughout their daily lives. They will therefore generally attend a specialist SEN school where learning can be broken down into very small steps and they can have access to a sensory environment. Their attainment is expected to remain below level 1 of the national curriculum, in the lower P-scale range (P1-P4), which are skills associated with very early levels of development (0-18 months). For example, cause and effect – such as pressing a switch to make something happen, or turn-taking – such as rolling a ball between two people.

## Severe Learning Difficulties SLD

Individuals with Severe Learning Difficulties (SLD) have a significant intellectual disability with an IQ level between 20-35. In addition, they may have difficulties in mobility, co-ordination, perception and the acquisition of self-help skills. They will also have difficulties understanding and communicating, often using basic words or gestures to communicate their needs.

People with SLD will need support in all areas of the curriculum. They may also require teaching of self-help, independence and social skills. Most will attend an SEN school and their attainments will be within the upper P-scale range (P4-P8) for much of their school careers and probably into adult life (this is below level 1 of the national curriculum and is within the typical developmental age range of 12months- 6 years).

## Moderate Learning Difficulties

People with Moderate Learning Difficulties have an IQ of between 35-50. They generally reach developmental milestones much more slowly than their peers do, and learn at a slower pace. They may also have associated speech and language delay, low levels of concentration, co-ordination difficulties and under-developed social, emotional and personal skills. Many will however be able to carry out day to day tasks with little or no support.

Most children with Moderate Learning Difficulties are educated in a mainstream school or units attached to mainstream schools, where they would access an adapted national curriculum. However, sometimes it may be decided that a specialist MLD school is more suitable for the individual's needs.

## Mild Learning Difficulty

People with Mild Learning Difficulties have an IQ between 50-70. They may be delayed in aspects of development but are generally able to care for themselves and perform many day to day tasks independently. Although they may require some support to understand abstract or complex ideas they are usually able to hold a conversation and communicate most of their needs and wishes. People with a mild learning disability quite often go undiagnosed.

People with Mild Learning Difficulties will likely attend a mainstream school and will follow the national curriculum. Where difficulties are identified they may receive additional support.

## LEARNING DISABILITIES AND OTHER CONDITIONS

Learning disabilities are often diagnosed alongside other conditions including Autism, Downs Syndrome and Cerebral Palsy. However, not all people with a condition such as Autism will have a learning disability. It is important to remember that in order to offer the best support for learning all aspects of an individuals diagnosis should be taken into account.

## SELECTING A SCHOOL TO MEET THE NEEDS OF THE INDIVIDUAL

The level of need identified will inform the type of school that is considered most suitable for the individual. Most children with PMLD or SLD will attend specialist schools, whereas children identified as having Mild or Moderate needs may find mainstream settings more suitable. Often specialist schools will cater for a specific group of needs for example a school may state that they are specifically for children with PMLD and SLD. This should be taken into account when selecting a school in the child's Education Health and Care (EHC) Plan. The LA has the right to refuse a named school under **Section 39(4) of the Children and Family Act 2014**, if the school is *unsuitable; the attendance of the child or young person will result in the inefficient education of others or the inefficient use of resources, i.e. it will cost much more*. Therefore, if parents choose a school which generally supports children with a different level of need to their child, the LA could refuse the school on these grounds.

