

Greater Manchester

GM = EqAL

Equality Alliance

**Inclusive Language
Subgroup**



**Learning
disability**

Preamble

- This guidance is the product of discussion and research by members of the GM=EqAl Inclusive Language Subgroup.
- It is part of a series created to help GM=EqAl members and staff be respectful and consistent in how we talk and write about the issues we work on.
- It sets out our agreed definitions and terminology around **LEARNING DISABILITY**, and explains key concepts in line with the values of GM=EqAl.
- GM=EqAl is keen for others to share and adopt our language guidance, and welcomes dialogue with partners in order to keep evolving the documents along with our understanding.
- This guidance has been robustly generated but does not claim absolute authority on any topic.

Short version

DO

- Use 'learning disability' or 'learning disabled' for people with a lifelong condition which significantly reduces their ability to process complex information, and to live independently.
- Use 'learning difficulty' or 'learning difference' for conditions such as Dyslexia or Dyspraxia.
- Use language that respects learning disabled people as active individuals with control over their own lives.

DON'T

- Use 'learning disability' and 'learning difficulty' interchangeably.
- Use the following terms: 'intellectual disability', 'slow learner', 'backward', and certainly not 'mentally handicapped'.
- Use negative framings such as 'only able to'.

Medical definition

In its medical definition, a learning disability includes the presence of:

- 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. [Damage to the brain which occurs after the age of 18 is classed as 'acquired brain injury' rather than a learning disability].

(from Valuing People, 2001 shorturl.at/eEHJ3)

- It is common and acceptable in the learning disability community to say someone 'has a learning disability', or to talk collectively about 'people with learning disabilities', in other words to use 'people first' language.
- For most other impairments the **social model of disability** (see shorturl.at/apCLR) prefers 'disability first' language, with the understanding that a Disabled person is disabled by the fact that society and the physical environment are rarely set up to meet their needs.
- It is important to keep in mind that the learning disability label does not capture who a person is: a friend, family member, student, community activist, employee, parent and so on.

Variability

- Learning disability exists on a scale. The level of impairment differs from one person to another and this determines the type of support an individual needs.
- Someone with a 'mild' learning disability may be able to function independently or with a small amount of support. For example, they may have difficulties in managing their money and bills, but not with other aspects of their life.
- Someone with 'severe' or 'profound and multiple' learning disabilities may need full time care and assistance with every aspect of their life.
- People with certain genetic conditions, such as Down's Syndrome, usually have some level of learning disability, from mild to profound.
- Some people with a learning disability are also autistic.
- Some people with a learning disability also have one or more physical or sensory impairment.

Learning difficulty

A **learning disability** is different from a **learning difficulty** (some people prefer the term **learning difference**). Learning difficulties do not affect general intellect.

Some examples are:

- Dyslexia – a difficulty with words
 - Dysgraphia – writing difficulty
 - Dyspraxia – motor difficulties
 - Dyscalculia – a difficulty performing mathematical calculations
 - Attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
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- Having one or more learning difficulty does not mean that you have a learning disability.
 - As with learning disability, learning difficulties exist on a scale. It is possible to have a mild or a severe learning difficulty, or something in between.
 - It is possible to have both a learning disability and a learning difficulty.

Exclusionary language

- Phrases to avoid:
 - ‘intellectual disability’ - not used in the UK
 - ‘cognitive impairment’ - used only in medical contexts
 - ‘slow learner’ or ‘backward’ or ‘handicapped’ – all have negative connotations
 - ‘mental handicap’ - now considered offensive.
- The word ‘only’ can imply judgement

For example, “she can only sit on a the welcome desk” is better rephrased as something like “having her on the welcome desk is the most effective use of her skills and abilities”

Ability to learn

- Though a person may have a significant learning disability, it is important never to assume that they cannot learn or are unable to make independent choices.
- People with learning disabilities achieve far more when they are given opportunities to learn in a way that suits them; to take risks and do things in ways which enable them to overcome barriers. For example, a person with a learning disability might not be able to read a six digit number, but may be able to use the telephone if it is programmed so that they just need to use a couple of keys, e.g. # 1
- Some people with learning disabilities can work in complex jobs, provided there supportive training and routine within that job.
- A person with a learning disability may be reliable, dedicated, committed, positive and friendly, yet have limited literacy and numeracy skills. They may also have difficulty in understanding and interpreting given situations and be slower to process information.
- It is essential to support individuals with a learning disability to be equal members of society, and to realise their full potential and goals.

What learning disability means to people who are born with it

Having a learning disability means different things to each person. These are some things people have said it means to them:

- We are not as quick at learning as other people
- We need support to learn new skills
- We need support with everyday tasks
- We may see, hear or understand things differently
- We cannot always do things for ourselves or on our own
- We might not understand common dangers very well
- We might use behaviour as well as words to communicate
- We might have sensory issues [meaning either **hypersensitivity** (over-responsiveness), or **hyposensitivity** (under-responsiveness) to a wide range of stimuli, a condition usually linked to autism.

www.autismspeaks.org/sensory-issues

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