

Resources

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Dorset People First

“We are people with learning disabilities supporting each other to speak up and lead change”

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Sources: Mencap, MIND, BILD.

Learning disability factsheet



Terminology

- Learning Disability
- Learning Difficulty (preferred by many people with disabilities)
- Intellectual disability
- PMLD – Profound and Multiple Learning Disability

There is at present no clear consensus on the terminology. It is however widely accepted that whatever terms are used they should be clear, inclusive and positive.

Definitions

The World Health Organisation defines learning disabilities as: “a state of arrested or incomplete development of mind”.

People with a learning disability find it harder than others to learn, understand and communicate.

Learning disability is a diagnosis, but it is not a disease, nor is it a physical or mental illness. Unlike the latter, so far as we know it is not treatable. Internationally three criteria are regarded as requiring to be met before learning disabilities can be identified:

- Intellectual impairment
- Social or adaptive dysfunction
- Early onset

Learning disabilities are often classified as “mild”, “moderate” and “severe”. These are labels that may be

useful in a social care context, but do not take into account the complexity of an individual’s abilities.

A person with a “mild” learning disability may be able to work, live independently with minimal support and maintain relationships with family and friends. Someone with a more severe disability may well require help with a range of everyday tasks and personal care. They may also need extra support with communication and maintaining personal relationships.

The terms “Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities”, “PMLD”, or “complex needs” are often used to describe people who, as well as a severe learning disability, have physical and/or sensory disabilities, health problems, mental health problems or autism. People with profound and multiple learning disabilities need full-time help with every aspect of their lives - including eating, drinking, washing, dressing and toileting.



Valuing People Now

Valuing People Now is the Government's three-year strategy to improve the lives of people with learning disabilities and their families. It updates "Valuing People" which was published in 2001.

It covers all aspects of life, including health, housing, getting a paid job, personalisation, transition, advocacy, hate crime and relationships.

An important part of making "Valuing People" happen has been the local Partnership Boards. They involve Local Authorities as well as self-advocates (people with learning disabilities) and family carers. You can find out about Dorset's Partnership board from <http://dorset.ldpb.info>



Changing places

Standard disabled toilets do not meet the needs of thousands of people, including 40,000 people with profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD).

Without adequate facilities, families and carers have to change the person they care for on a cramped and dirty toilet floor. The alternative is to limit outings to a few short hours, or not go out at all. Changing Places toilets have a height-adjustable changing bench, a hoist and plenty of space - and can make all the difference to someone with PMLD.

Mencap, along with many other organisations such as Dorset People First are campaigning to have more Changing Places installed across the country.

Incidence and causes of learning disability

A learning disability is caused by the way the brain develops.

There are many different types and most develop before a baby is born, during birth or because of a serious illness in early childhood. There are also many genetic causes. A learning disability is lifelong and usually has a significant impact on a person's life. Learning disabilities are not acquired later as a result of an accident, adult disease or illness, or dementia.

There are no official statistics that tell us precisely how many people there are with learning disabilities in the UK. It is thought that there is a total of between 602,000 and 1,204,000. This is a very hard statistic to verify. This is partly because many people with mild learning disabilities may never be diagnosed.



Associated conditions

Autism

Autism is a lifelong condition that can affect the way a person communicates and relates to other people and the world around them. People with autism often see the world as a chaotic place with no clear boundaries, order or meaning. Autism is not a learning disability, but research suggests that around half of people with autism may also have a learning disability.

Cerebral Palsy

Cerebral palsy is not a learning disability, but many people with cerebral palsy also have a learning disability. It is not a disease or an illness but a physical condition that affects the person's movement and control of their body. It is caused by a part of the brain that has not developed properly either before birth, during birth, or during early childhood. There are several different types of cerebral palsy, depending on which parts of the brain have been damaged. Some people are severely affected, while in others it is barely noticeable.

Epilepsy

Epilepsy is one of the most common conditions affecting the brain. It is not a learning disability but 30% of people with a learning disability also have epilepsy. People with epilepsy have seizures when the way their brain works becomes disrupted. Most seizures are sudden and short-lived, lasting a matter of seconds or minutes, but for many people they can be controlled with the right medication.

Mental Health

It is known that people with learning disabilities are more vulnerable to mental health problems and psychiatric illnesses than the general population. It is estimated that 25% – 40% of people with learning disabilities also have additional mental health needs.

Communication

The majority of people with learning disabilities have communication difficulties. This may be to do with receiving information (hearing and understanding), or with giving information (organising thoughts, speech, writing, signing...etc).

It is useful initially to check people's sight and hearing when supporting communication.

There are many communication tools that can be tried. Speech and language therapists will be able to help.

Sign language

Sign language such as Makaton and Signalong. This is a method for signing the "Key Words" in each sentence. They are not fully grammatical languages like BSL.

Symbols

Symbols such as those used by "Widgit" computer software can be very useful for creating labels, timetables and other visual prompts. Photographs can be used in much the same way and can represent local places and familiar scenes.

Intensive interaction

Intensive interaction is a way of working with people who have severe autism or learning disability to develop the basics of communication such as sharing personal space, facial expression and turn-taking.

Objects of reference

Object of reference is using objects to represent events or ideas. For instance, a wooden spoon to mean that we are cooking this morning.

Things that are helpful for people with learning disabilities

- Asking people what is helpful for them, because everyone is individual.

Some helpful things might be:

- Accessible transport
- Easy to Read information – using large print and photographs
- Audio Information
- "Changing Places" toilet facilities
- Not using jargon
- Giving one piece of information at a time