

Definition of a Learning Disability

A learning disability is not a disease and is not an illness, and is not acquired in adulthood or as a result of injury or disease. A learning disability will be evident from childhood, and in many cases the cause of the learning disability may not be clear. In other cases, genetics, chromosomal abnormalities or environmental factors may be cited as the cause.

It is thought that a person should display three fundamental criteria before being diagnosed as having a learning disability. These are identified by three approaches, namely:

- Assessing any intellectual impairment (IQ)
- Assessing social dysfunction combined with IQ
- Identifying of early onset of the above

Some people with learning disabilities do, however, tend to use the term 'learning difficulties', although this does tend to refer to problems with learning in children rather than an overall description of functional and intellectual impairment.

It is worth noting that each learning disability condition or syndrome has different symptoms and behaviours associated with it, and the way in which these manifest themselves can and do depend on the individual. Consequently it is important to remember first and foremost that when defining and categorising a learning disability, one is not merely labelling an individual. The overall impact and level of support and care required will always, therefore, be assessed based on the individual person and their social context.

Categories of Learning Disabilities

One can categorise learning disabilities into four very basic groups – mild, moderate and severe and profound. Intellectual impairment based on IQ scores is one way to categorise a learning disability:

- 50-70 - Mild
- 35-50 - Moderate
- 20-35 - Severe
- less than 20 - Profound

As aforementioned, an IQ score is not sufficient in wholly defining the level of learning disability. This is because IQ scores can fluctuate due to personal development and growth. Most people with mild learning disabilities integrate into society with little problem, owing to their ability to communicate through spoken language and adapting to their social environment. Lower level support,



particularly during schooling may help with managing the learning disabilities in these cases.

However, those with moderate or severe learning disabilities may also display other associated physical and mental health problems. This can mean that they may be more vulnerable and require additional support with healthcare management, mobility and continence.

Degrees of Learning Disability

- Mild:** Over three quarter of people with learning disabilities have mild learning disabilities. The majority of these live independently, many have their own families are in employment and have no need for extra support from services except in time of crisis.
- Moderate:** For people with a moderate learning disability the level of support needed is higher. Many of them will need some degree of support with everyday tasks and may have difficulty in communicating their needs.
- Severe / Profound:** People with severe and profound learning disability may have significantly increased health needs such as a higher rate of epilepsy, sensory impairments and physical disabilities. They are likely to have more complex needs and greater difficulty in communicating their needs. Some individuals engage in behaviour that others consider challenging in an effort to communicate their needs or as an expression of their frustration. Self-injury is particularly common in people with profound learning disability. In severe cases this can lead to additional disability, poor health and a significantly decreased quality of life.