

# Supporting Children with Learning Disabilities

Approximately 1-3 percent of the global population has a learning disability.

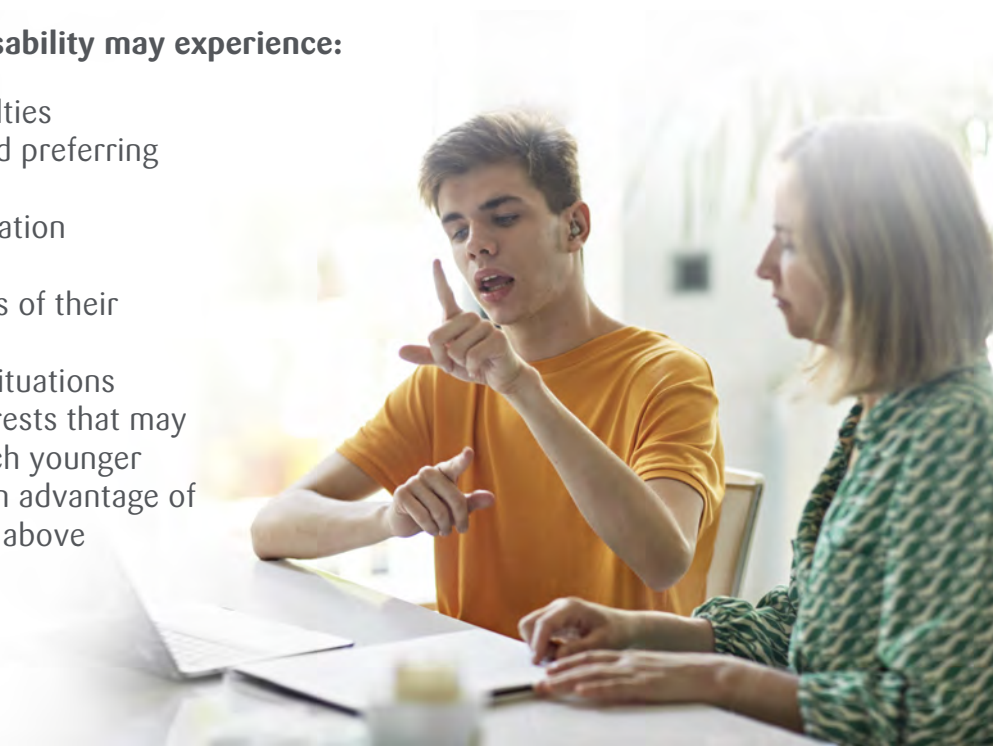
**In the UK and Ireland, a learning disability (sometimes also called an intellectual disability) is a term used when a person has differences and delays in their cognitive functioning (thinking and understanding, sometimes measured by their IQ) and their adaptive skills (self-care and practical skills).** Learning disability can sound similar to, but is very different from, a specific learning difficulty, such as dyslexia. Specific learning difficulties are when someone has difficulty in a specific area, but their thinking, understanding and skills in all other areas are typical for their age. Confusingly, in America the term used for what we would call specific learning difficulties is a learning disability!

People with a learning disability usually develop and learn more slowly or differently to other people of the same age and they usually have delays, differences or difficulties in several areas of their functioning (e.g. toileting, eating, motor skills, speech and language, social skills). When children are younger (under 5), this is often described as global developmental delay. Every person with a learning disability is different and has their own unique profile of skills, strengths, challenges and needs. **People with a learning disability are more likely to have additional health needs and physical disabilities.** They may also have other differences such as autism. People with a learning disability can live full and meaningful lives, and can study, work, have friends and relationships, but are likely to need support to live independently.

Unlike the term suggests, people with a learning disability can learn and develop and improve their skills, but they are unlikely to 'catch up' to the same level as the rest of their peers even with help and support. Some children with a learning disability attend specialist schools and others attend mainstream school settings with extra support. A learning disability is lifelong and someone with a learning disability is likely to need ongoing help and support into adulthood and beyond.

## Individuals with a learning disability may experience:

- Sensory processing difficulties
- Difficulties with change and preferring things that are familiar
- Difficulties with communication and understanding
- Seeming 'younger' in terms of their understanding and coping with emotions and social situations
- Other behaviours and interests that may be typical of someone much younger
- Vulnerability to being taken advantage of or abused due to all of the above



**There are a number of ways we can help and support individuals with a learning disability (and those close to them) to cope the best they can and engage in a meaningful and valued life. These include:**

- Considering someone's level of understanding and adapting your language to make it clear, simple and unambiguous and reducing any unnecessary words.
- Checking someone has understood what you mean and repeating or rewording this more simply to make it easier to understand.
- Providing information in a visual or written format as well as discussing verbally.
- Being respectful and accepting of a person's interests and behaviours, which may be similar to those of someone younger.
- Considering that someone may be overwhelmed and struggling with things about the environment (lights, sounds, busyness, temperature, unfamiliarity etc) if they are displaying behaviour that you would not expect.
- Looking out for individuals who may be vulnerable and reporting any concerns you may have relating to how someone appears to be treated if this does not sit right with you.
- If you are a parent, carer or family member of a child with a learning disability, connect with others in a similar situation through online or face to face support groups or communities. This can be a helpful source of advice and a safe space to share with others who are likely to have similar experiences.
- Check that you are accessing all the benefits and supports your child is entitled to as a result of their additional needs.
- Don't be afraid to advocate for your child – as their parent/carer you usually know them better than anyone else and can be their voice if they are unable to tell others what they need.
- Provide opportunities for your child to succeed – think about things they can do and make sure they have the chance to do these. If they struggle, break down tasks so that there are elements that they can complete. This will give them a sense of achievement and success and helps empower them and increase their sense of control in their life.

**Useful resources for further reading:**

British Institute of Learning Disabilities (BILD) Website

<http://www.bild.org.uk>

Mencap Website

<http://www.mencap.org.uk>

