

# Briefing Paper 12: Identifying the degree of a person's learning disabilities

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This briefing paper provides exemplars to help reviewers indicate the degree of a person's learning disabilities in relation to their needs, in the absence of this information being otherwise available.

Not all people with learning disabilities are the same, and it is important that we can identify disparities within the population of people with learning disabilities. All levels of learning disability are points on a spectrum, and there are no clear dividing lines between them, or between people with mild learning disabilities and the general population. That said, it can sometimes be helpful for a short-hand indication of whether a person has 'mild', 'moderate', 'severe', or 'profound and/or multiple' learning disabilities.

## **Mild learning disabilities**

People with mild learning disabilities would have an approximate IQ in the range of 50-69 or a mental age of 9-12 years. Some may not have been diagnosed with learning disabilities because they function and adapt well socially. They can communicate using spoken language, have reasonable skills, and given the chance can manage well with a low level of appropriate, flexible support in response to changing needs.

However, people with mild learning disabilities are likely to have had some learning disabilities in school, and as adults may have difficulties holding down employment. They may be able to effectively manage their own personal care needs with minimal support, but they may have more significant difficulties in expressing ideas and feelings in words, a limited ability to abstract and generalise what they learn, limited attention-span, slow speech and language development, and difficulties with reading, writing and comprehension. This may in turn affect their self-esteem and confidence.

## **Moderate learning disabilities**

People with moderate learning disabilities would have an approximate IQ in the range of 35-49 or a mental age of 6-9 years. They are likely to have had marked developmental delays identified in childhood, possibly with accompanying impairments such as physical, hearing or visual impairment, autistic spectrum condition (ASC), emotional disturbance or impairment in communication skills.

People with moderate learning disabilities will need varying degrees of regular support to live and work in the community. Many acquire adequate communication skills, and can learn to develop some degree of independence in self-care although are likely to need regular supervision and prompting. Some, however, are likely to need more substantial assistance with communication, managing risk, dealing with social and/or emotional issues and possibly more physical help with mobility, continence, and eating. They are likely to need support with literacy and numeracy, including managing money, may have difficulty concentrating on activities, with generalising and transferring knowledge across situations and with processing input from more than one sense at a time.

Although people with moderate learning disabilities are unlikely to be able to manage independent living and require considerable supervision or supported living arrangements, they may have achieved a degree

of independence by going out alone to familiar locations using a set route. However, they may be unable to cope with any deviation from this routine, and when their structured environment is changed they may require considerably more support.

### **Severe learning disabilities**

People with severe learning disabilities would have an approximate IQ in the range of 20-34 or a mental age of 3-6 years. They are likely to have had significant delays in reaching their developmental milestones as a child and significant speech and/or communication difficulties. They may also have accompanying impairments such as physical, hearing or visual impairment, autistic spectrum condition (ASC), emotional disturbance or epilepsy. People with severe learning disabilities are likely to have a limited awareness and understanding of themselves, of the people around them and of the world they live in.

People with severe learning disabilities are likely to be in need of significant continuous support with their day to day lives. They will have a dependence on others to satisfy basic needs such as feeding and toileting, mobility, and communication, and many are unlikely to have learnt self-care skills in these areas. Most people with severe learning disabilities require a high degree of support in managing risk, and possibly their behaviours, and need continual supervision indoors and outdoors.

### **Profound and/or multiple learning disabilities**

People with profound learning disabilities would have an approximate IQ under 20 or a mental age below 3 years. They are likely to have other sensory or physical impairments, complex health needs, have great difficulties in communicating and be multiply disabled. They may have behaviours that challenge those supporting them. Many people with profound and multiple learning disabilities rely on facial expressions, vocal sounds, body language and behaviour to communicate. Some people may use a small range of formal communication, such as speech, symbols or signs, but some may not have reached the stage of using intentional communication, and they may rely on others to interpret their reactions to events and people, and whether they are in pain.

Some people with profound and multiple learning disabilities are fully mobile, but many use a wheelchair, have difficulty with movement and are unable to control or vary their posture efficiently. They need specialised equipment to aid their mobility, to support their posture and to protect and restore their body shape, muscle tone and quality of life. An increasing number of people are described as being 'technology dependent', which may mean they need oxygen, tube feeding or suctioning equipment.

All children and adults with profound and multiple learning disabilities will need high levels of continuous, skilled support for life. This includes help with all aspects of personal care, such as washing, dressing and eating, as well as ensuring that they have access to high quality meaningful activity throughout their lives.

### **Further Information**

BILD Information about learning disabilities <http://www.bild.org.uk/information/faqs/#I-have-heard-the-terms-profound-severe-moderate-and-mild-learning-disability-What-do-these-mean>