

Learning Disabilities vs Learning Difficulties

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What do you already know about the differences between a learning disability and learning difficulty?

Definition of a Learning Disability

A learning disability is defined as a “a state of arrested or incomplete development of mind” (World Health Organisation) or a significant lifelong condition which starts before adulthood and affects development and leads to help being required to:

- Understand information
- Learn skills
- Cope independently
- (Disability = something that incapacitates)

There are 4 main groups of which they can be placed into:

- Mild (IQ of 50-70)
- Moderate (IQ of 35-50)
- Severe (IQ of 20-35),
- Profound (IQ of less than 20)

Examples of a Learning Disability

- Down's Syndrome. This is the most common specific cause of a learning disability with 85% experiencing this to a moderate or severe degree. In addition to a cognitive impairment they also have other health conditions linked to this, including heart disorders, hearing and vision problems, thyroid problems and recurrent infections.
- Fragile X syndrome. This is the second most specific cause of learning disability after Down's Syndrome but is the most inherited. They may act impulsively, feel restless, be very active and have heightened senses. This is more common in boys than girls. People with this condition also share some physical features including a long narrow face with prominent jaw bones and ears. The diagnosis of this condition can be delayed as these features are difficult to see in young children.

Definition of a Learning Difficulty

- A learning difficulty can be stated as any learning or emotional problem that affects, or substantially affects, a person's ability to learn, get along with others and follow convention. (Difficulty = Obstacle)
- A person with a Specific Learning Difficulty (SpLD) will be as able as any other child, except in one or two areas of their learning for example they may find it difficult to recognise letters or cope with numbers and reading.

People with learning difficulties may display with the following:

- Struggle to keep up with classmates and come to see themselves as stupid or no good.
- May find it difficult to concentrate and as a result find tasks boring.
- Search for other ways to pass the time and succeed.
- They become angry and frustrated and so behavioural problems are common. These may get worse if they do not receive the suitable help.

Examples of Learning Difficulties

- Dyslexia – This is the most common Specific Learning Difficulty. It mainly effects the development of literacy and language related skills and is characterized by weaknesses in areas such as information/phonological processing and working memory.
- Dyspraxia (Developmental Co-Ordination Disorder) – Will generally have weakness in motor co-ordination often results in them approaching and carrying out physical tasks in a disorganized and clumsy manner.
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) – This affects the parts of the brain associated with control of attention, impulse inhibition and concentration. Are likely to find it hard to focus on work and experience difficulties in organizing themselves.
- Dyscalculia/mathematical learning difficulties – Difficulties with calculations and the effective processing of mathematical information.

The use of Educational, Health and Care (ECH) Plans

- The Educational Health and Care (EHC) Plan replaces the Statement for Special Educational Needs and address the broader health and social needs of the child/young person.
- The ECH Plan is for children and young people aged up to 25 who needs more support than what is available through Special Educational Needs.
- When using these within PIP reports please be careful and ensure that the reason for this plan to be implemented is clear. Please do not assume that just because a person has one of these plans in place that they will score in within the activities for PIP. This will depend upon what restrictions are caused a result of their impairment and how severe this is.

Issues within PIP

- Learning disabilities are not the same as learning difficulties or mental illness. This can be confusing as some people use the term “learning difficulties” to cover the whole range of learning disabilities.
- A specific learning difficulty is not a mental illness but are more likely to develop mental health problems such as anxiety. In addition, they commonly have developmental problems as Autistic Spectrum Disorder or ADHD which can also make it difficult to assess function to the variability of these conditions.
- Because many of the effects of different SpLD are similar or overlap, it is common for individuals to be diagnosed with more than one of these or simply as having “Specific Learning Difficulties”. However, these vary massively in terms of severity from individual to individual and therefore so do the support needs.

How these will affect activities within PIP

- Differentiating between a learning disability and difficulty will be key here. Also getting the information to ascertain how severely they are affected, and level of support received as a result of their condition is key.

Please discuss how these conditions will affect the following activities:

- Activities 1,2, 4 and 6 – Independent, prompting, supervision assistance?
- Activity 3 – When may support be required even when medication is not prescribed?
- Activities 7 and 8 – Independent, support with basic or complex?
- Activity 9 – Independent, prompting or social support?
- Activity 10 – Independent , assistance with complex or simple decisions?
- Activity 11 – Independent, prompting, support with familiar/unfamiliar journeys

Thank you.



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Redaction Summary

Page 1

Redaction 1.1

Exemptions/exceptions:

- S.40 - Personal Information