

## Definitions of learning disability and learning difficulties

Language is changing all the time. The words we use to describe a particular impairment or disability change as a result of listening to people with personal experience and as a result of changing values and attitudes in society. In addition, the same words can have different meanings in different countries. Although we share a common language with countries such as America and Australia the words we use to describe particular disabilities related to learning are different.

People can often find the term 'learning disability' confusing because there are several different explanations about what a learning disability is. Learning disability and learning difficulties are terms that are commonly used in the UK. These two terms are often interchangeable when used in the context of health and social care for adults. Some people with learning disabilities prefer the term learning difficulties.

*People First, an advocacy organisation, says:*

At People First (Self Advocacy), when we talk about people with learning difficulties, we mean 'people labelled as having a learning difficulty'. This is one of the labels that society puts on us to mark us out as not being able to understand things the same as other people... We believe that people labelled as having a learning difficulty are disabled by society. We choose the term 'learning difficulty' instead of 'learning disability' to get across the idea that our learning support needs change over time.

For more information on People First go to [www.peoplefirstltd.com](http://www.peoplefirstltd.com)

There are several definitions of learning disability used in the UK. A commonly used one is from *Valuing People: a new strategy for learning disability for the 21st century*, the government White Paper for England about health and social care support for people with a learning disability (2001). It explains that a learning disability includes the presence of:

- a significantly reduced ability to understand new or complex information or to learn new skills;
- a reduced ability to cope independently;
- an impairment that started before adulthood, with a lasting effect on development.

This means that the person will find it harder to understand, learn and remember new things, and means that the person may have problems with a range of things such as communication, being aware of risks or managing everyday tasks.

*Josie, a woman with Down's syndrome, explains how having a learning disability affects her:*

You get stuck a lot. My sister helps me with sorting out my money.

In UK education services, the term 'learning difficulty' includes children and young people who have 'specific learning difficulties', for example dyslexia, but who do not have a significant general impairment of intelligence. The Special Educational Needs codes also use the terms 'moderate learning difficulty', 'severe learning difficulty' and 'profound multiple learning difficulty', which relate to general impairments in learning of different severity. These could be seen as interchangeable with the term 'learning disability' which is used in health and social care, and the groups of mild, moderate, severe and profound learning disabilities explained below. Further information about definitions can be found at [www.improvinghealthandlives.org.uk](http://www.improvinghealthandlives.org.uk), [www.bild.org.uk](http://www.bild.org.uk) and [www.bris.ac.uk/cipold](http://www.bris.ac.uk/cipold)

Finally, when thinking about different definitions it is important to know that the UK is the only country that uses the term learning disability in the way described above. In other English speaking countries the term 'intellectual disability' is growing in usage. For the first time in the UK a report by Professor Jim Mansell, for the Department of Health, called *Raising Our Sights: services for adults with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities* (2010) used the term intellectual disability instead of learning disability. This could indicate that we are on the cusp of a change in the use of language in the UK. In the 1970s the term to describe people with a learning disability changed from people with mental sub normality to people with a mental handicap. And again in the 1990s the language changed from people with a mental handicap to people with a learning disability. Another change may now be about to occur – only time will tell.

In America the term 'learning disability' has a different meaning to that used in the UK. In the USA, learning disability is used to cover several specific learning disorders particularly in relation to reading, writing and maths, such as dyslexia, dyspraxia and dyscalculia. The terms 'intellectual disabilities' and



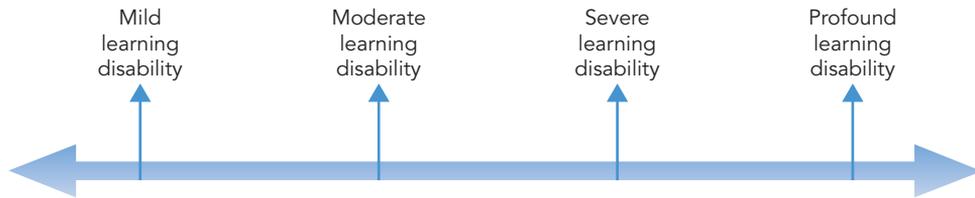
'mental retardation' are commonly used as labels to describe what we in the UK would understand as learning disabilities.

The term 'learning disability' is used to describe a very varied group of individuals. This includes people who have high levels of care needs such as James, in our introduction, to those who only need support in a few areas such as budgeting or accessing healthcare. Categorising people into groups on the basis of their disability is almost as bad as labelling them. In many ways it is for the convenience of those planning and delivering services, and it does not benefit the people being placed into a certain group. However, if you are to understand learning disability then you need to know that in the UK we have been categorising people in relation to the nature of their needs or level of disability for over 100 years. We currently use the terms profound, severe, moderate and mild to make a distinction between different levels of need. These categories are not rigid and there are no clear dividing lines between the different groups. Equally, there is no clear cut off point between people with mild learning disabilities and the general population. It is always helpful to remember that you must see the person first and that labels and categories are ways that individuals and society have sought to identify and plan for particular groups of citizens. The section below concentrates on the medical and social models of disability and this will show that the labels and categories we use have been developed from deep rooted attitudes to people with disabilities.

## The continuum of learning ability

In an attempt to explain the wide range of different abilities the idea of a continuum of learning has been used for some time. The terms currently used are shown on the continuum below and are then described in more detail.

**Profound** – People with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities, or profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD), can be some of the most disabled individuals in our communities. They have a profound intellectual disability, which means that their intelligence quotient (IQ) is estimated to be under 20 and therefore they have severely limited understanding (further information about IQ tests can be found on page 8). In addition, they may have multiple disabilities, which can include impairments of vision, hearing and movement as well as other challenges such as epilepsy and autism. Most people in this group need support with mobility and many have complex health needs requiring extensive support. People with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities may have considerable difficulty communicating



*The continuum of learning ability.*

and characteristically have very limited understanding. Many people express themselves through non-verbal means, or at most through using a few words or symbols. In addition some people need support with behaviour that is seen as challenging, such as self-injury. There are about 16,000 adults with profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD) in England. This definition is taken from the *Raising Our Sights* report (2010) by Professor Jim Mansell.

**Severe** – People with a severe learning disability often use basic words and gestures to communicate their needs. Many need a high level of support with everyday activities such as cooking, budgeting, cleaning and shopping, but many can look after some if not all of their own personal care needs. Some people have additional medical needs and some need support with mobility issues.

**Moderate** – People with a moderate learning disability are likely to have some language skills that mean they can communicate about their day to day needs and wishes. People may need some support with caring for themselves, but many will be able to carry out day to day tasks with support.

**Mild** – A person who is said to have a mild learning disability is usually able to hold a conversation, and communicate most of their needs and wishes. They may need some support to understand abstract or complex ideas. People are often independent in caring for themselves and doing many everyday tasks. They usually have some basic reading and writing skills. People with a mild learning disability quite often go undiagnosed. Most people still need appropriate support with tasks such as budgeting and completing forms.

Using labels for learning disabilities can be both helpful and unhelpful at the same time. It can be helpful to the person, their family or those people who work with them to understand their needs and what support they might need. However, the categories can be unhelpful if the person with the learning disability is just seen as that label, for example 'profound learning disability',