

DELIVERING LIBRARY SERVICES FOR DISABLED PEOPLE

GUIDANCE NOTES ON WORKING WITH CUSTOMERS WHO HAVE DISABILITIES

PEOPLE WITH A LEARNING DISABILITY

Background information

A learning disability is an impairment of *intellectual ability* which can happen before birth, at birth, or during a child's early years. There may be a related or additional physical or sensory impairment (eg. blindness, deafness).

Learning disability can take many forms and have many causes and effects. Generally speaking, a child with a learning disability will learn more slowly than other children of the same age. This reduced pace of development may continue into adult life. Two of the more common effects of having a learning disability are difficulties in developing complex language and difficulties in understanding. The important thing to remember however is that ***people with learning disabilities are able to learn***, but may need to use other methods of learning and be given the ***right support and encouragement***.

Traditionally, people with learning disabilities may have been denied the opportunity to learn how to live in the community. With more enlightened attitudes however, people with learning disabilities are increasingly gaining control and choice over their own lives and this should also extend to having access to information.

People with learning disabilities may need more time to think about what they want to say or to form an answer, or may need encouragement to answer a question. This may embarrass the listener, or cause impatience. For the person with a learning disability it may cause frustration, or a feeling of lack of power, of being hassled, or of not being taken seriously. It's important, therefore, that time and patience are given to those people with learning disabilities who require it, to enable them to deal with things as independently as possible.

What you can do....

Know when, and when not, to help

- Ask if help is needed.
- Ask what help is needed.
- Don't look for difficulties where there are none – a person may just want to have a browse themselves.

Speak clearly

- Use short sentences – straightforward words and ideas.
- Speak directly to the person, not to any carers present.
- Only ask one question at a time.

Give additional clues and prompts

- Use gestures when speaking.
- Use illustrations as aids.
- Give prompts, verbally and visually.

Be patient

- Be prepared for hesitation.
- Give time for response.
- Repeat the information as appropriate.
- Be calm and try to dispel any anxiety.
- Wait for a choice to be made.
- Be patient with any challenging behaviour, and where necessary, explain in a firm but polite way, why something isn't appropriate.

Listen carefully

- If the person repeats your speech, this may indicate a lack of understanding, so repeat the question, in another way.
- Check understanding before proceeding.

Don't patronise

- Don't speak down to the customer.
- Use age-appropriate language.
- Don't overreact and treat adults like children.

These notes have been assisted by the following publications:

- Enhancing Services for disabled Library Users
- Clear Access – Visually impaired people's access to Local Government – LGMB
- Sound Practice – Deaf People's Access to Local Government - LGMB

- Welcoming customers with learning disabilities – Mencap