Helping those with learning disabilities get active and stay active with Walking for Health

Advice from Mencap, the leading UK charity for people with learning disabilities

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What is a learning disability?

Mencap define a learning disability as:

- A learning disability is a reduced intellectual ability and difficulty with everyday activities – for example household tasks, socialising or managing money – which affects someone for their whole life.
- People with a learning disability tend to take longer to learn and may need support to develop new skills, understand complex information and interact with other people.
- The level of support someone needs depends on individual factors, including the severity of their learning disability. For example, someone with a mild learning disability may only need support with things like getting a job. However, someone with a severe or profound learning disability may need full-time care and support with every aspect of their life – they may also have physical disabilities.
- People with certain specific conditions can have a learning disability too. For example, people with Down’s syndrome and some people with autism have a learning disability.
• Learning disability is often confused with dyslexia and mental health problems. Mencap describes dyslexia as a “learning difficulty” because, unlike learning disability, it does not affect intellect. Mental health problems can affect anyone at any time and may be overcome with treatment, which is not true of learning disability.
• It’s important to remember that with the right support, most people with a learning disability in the UK can lead independent lives.

Other definitions may include medical model views such as:

- The person has a lower than average score on IQ tests. Generally it has to be below 75 to be called a learning disability (this score can vary across the country to access certain services).
- The impairment must be present before the age of 18.

It is important to remember that when people have a learning disability they will usually have difficulty with:

• Learning new things.
• Understanding.
• Communication.

**Learning disability and mental health**

Many people do not realise there is a difference between learning disability and mental health. The key differences between them are:

A learning disability is:

• Usually present from birth, an early age or before adulthood.
• It affects the way you communicate, learn and understand.
• It cannot be treated medically or cured.

Mental illness in comparison:

• Can start at any point in life.
• Affects the way you think, feel and behave.
• Can be treated with therapy or medication, which can help some people.

Don’t forget that people with a learning disability can also be affected by mental illness like any other member of society.
How do I know if someone has a learning disability?
Learning disabilities can be hard to spot sometimes. There are clues to indicate that someone might have a learning disability or communication difficulty, but they can also be typical of other groups of people so beware of only looking for one. If someone is presenting several of these it should alert you that they may have a learning disability.

In many cases you do not know, and will not know unless they tell you.

- They may be unable to do complicated tasks without some supervision.
- They might avoid giving eye contact.
- They may speak quietly, making it difficult to understand.
- They may give one word answers to your questions.
- They might seem not to be listening to you.
- They could get upset or aggressive if you ask lots of questions.
- They might not seem to understand what you’re saying.
- They could react or act slowly or only with encouragement and prompting.
- They may give slow, confused or inaccurate responses.
- They might only respond to part of an instruction.
- They may keep repeating themselves.
- They could appear chaotic and disorganised.
- They may have difficulty reading or writing.
- They could have a short attention span.
- They may have speech difficulties.
- They could seem overly friendly or over confident.
- They may have difficulties in developing emotionally.
- They could be friendly and trusting of others, unaware of dangers or inappropriate relationships.
- They may be curious, uninhibited and unaware of social constraints.
- They could be aggressive or quick to hit out when disturbed.
- They may be talking to you, but seem not to be following the conversation.
- They may keep going off the point of a conversation.
- They could use set phrases and sayings e.g. “to be precise”
- They might agree with everything you say

Remember some people with a learning disability may not show any of these

Making walks suitable for those with learning disabilities
The following section is designed to help you in developing specialist walks or looking at how your current walks can be more inclusive for people with a learning disability.
Inclusion means that everyone has an equal opportunity to take part in activities and suitable changes are made to help this happen.

It is about:
- Equality of opportunity.
- Focusing on strengths and abilities.
- A ‘can do’ attitude.
- Different groups mixing together.
- Being non-judgmental.
- Ensuring everyone’s needs are met.
- Support being given discreetly.
- Empowering people.
- Valuing views and wishes.
- Same opportunities for all.

Integration is slightly different and means where a service, such as a health walk, happily accepts people of differing abilities. However these people are then expected to fit in with the service being provided with little or no changes made to help them with their individual needs.

Our aim is that people with learning disabilities will be included in the walks that you offer and not just integrated. However for many people with a learning disability there may not be many or significant adaptations required for them to attend.

Many people with a learning disability live independently, travel independently and can cope with most of life’s issues. You probably have some people on your walks that already have a learning disability and don’t even recognise it. Not everyone who has a learning disability needs a carer or support worker to come with them, although many do.

Below you will find information on how to set up a new walk for people with learning disabilities, tips on adapting the walks you run at the moment and further advice and guidance.

How do I set up a specialist walk for people with a learning disability?
The best thing to do would be to contact a local support group such as Mencap, People First or ask your local social services learning disability team. These groups can support you in making the arrangements you need to set up a walk.

It is useful to think about how people with a learning disability can find out about your walks:
- Are walk details on relevant local websites?
- Are posters in places where people with a learning disability may see them?
- Is the text easy enough to understand?
- Can they contact you easily to find out more details?
Many people with disabilities will assume activities are not suitable for them unless you explicitly tell them in your advertising that they are. Try to make it clear that they are welcome, but be prepared that many will want to contact you first to check out the suitability of the walk before turning up.

People with a learning disability often want to get involved in walking groups, and are a great source of information. Speak to your local Mencap group, Council’s Community Learning Disability Team, local Advocacy Service, local People First group and/or local ‘Speak Out’ groups who will signpost you to people with a learning disability who may be willing to assist in planning walks or take part in consultations.

- Are there any learning disability friendly activities already running locally?
  - If yes:
    - What days and times does it run?
    - Is it well attended? Why or why not?
    - How do people book to attend?
    - What do people who attend think of it? Why?
    - What do people who do not attend think of it? Why?
  - If not:
    - What else happens for people with a learning disability during the week locally? You don’t want to set up a walk on a Wednesday if that is the only day something else is on locally.
    - Visit a local Mencap group, or somewhere people with a learning disability meet and ask them about your plans:
      - Would they come? Why/why not?
      - What day/time is best for them? Why?
      - What support would they require?
      - Where would they like to walk from and to?
    - Think about how they would want to receive publicity:
      - Can they access websites?
      - Do they prefer printed leaflets?
      - Would they feel confident to phone you and book them self on?
      - Do you want/need people to be referred to the walk?

Making reasonable adjustments

When people with a learning disability join a group, you may need to make some changes to enable the person to take part in the walk. This is often referred to as ‘reasonable adjustments’ – giving disabled people access to the service the same as non-disabled people.

As a starting point consider how you plan your existing walks, do you already have provision in place to make changes and reasonable adjustments? They may be adequate for a person with a learning disability. The important thing is to ask the person what support if any they need or things they may find difficult if they come on your walk.

Things you may want to consider are:
• If you provide written material make sure it is clearly written with no difficult words or jargon. Use bullets points and pictures to support the text. Consider also having a larger text version available using font size 16.
• If you want to use pictures you can always take your own using a digital camera or use clip art. Mencap use photo symbols www.photosymbols.com
• Consider toilet breaks during the walk. Think about the walk – do you go past any public toilets?
• Consider rest areas – do you go past any suitable areas to sit down or take a rest if needed?
• Consider landmarks where the walk can end safely e.g. after one mile, three miles and five miles.
• Ensure all emergency contact details for walkers are up to date.
• A volunteer to assist with map reading, guidance and general companionship/support.
• If the person has communication difficulties, gain information from them and/or people who know the person well e.g., do they have a communication passport? Agree some key words/signs beforehand. If you put “communication passport” into the internet you will find lots of examples of these.

Risk assessments
When supporting people with learning disabilities there should be no reason why the risk assessments you already have in place will not be suitable.

Should a person have additional medical needs such as epilepsy, the risk assessment should reflect this and advice/guidance gained in supporting a seizure from the person with learning disabilities or someone who knows them well. Such conditions should not prevent the person from taking part in the walk; it’s about gathering as much information as required.

Carers and paid staff are an excellent source of information that can help you ensure that the person takes part in the walk safely and free from harm. Don’t be afraid of asking the person directly what support they need – usually they will know and be more than happy to tell you.

Promoting walks for people with learning difficulties
Mencap produces a document called ‘Make it clear’ that describes how to make accessible information for people with learning disabilities it can be accessed from: http://www.mencap.org.uk/make_it_clear

Check your communication follows the following:

• Use common everyday words rather than complex or jargon words.
• Use numerals for numbers rather than words. For example, 23 instead of twenty three.
• Write in short, clear sentences using one sentence to express one idea. Use active verbs to clearly describe the action.
  For example – “John loves Mary” not
  “Mary is loved by John”.
• Use full stops. Try not to use other punctuation.
• Use bullet points for examples and instructions.
- Do not use abbreviations.
  Use **for example** and **do not**, not *e.g.* and *don’t*.

- Do not split words over 2 lines.
- Do not split sentences over 2 pages. If you cannot finish a sentence on a page move the whole sentence to the next page.
- Use page numbers.
- Avoid columns, they are confusing. It is easier to read straight across the page.
- On forms leave a lot of room for people to fill in their name, address and so on. It often helps people to have a box to write in rather than lines to write on.
- Show times with clocks. Times should be in 12 hour format.
- Maps are difficult to understand. Use pictures of places that people will recognise. Explain how to find the place in words as well as pictures.
- Information that you can read like a book is easier to follow than lots of sheets. Make your book A5 size or larger so it is easy to hold and turn the pages.
- Use **bold** to highlight important words. Italic and block capitals change the shape of words and can make them harder to read for some people.

10 top tips for communicating with people who have a learning disability

1. Be aware that too much noise can be distracting for them. Talk to them in a quiet area or away from the main group. If you are talking to a large group be aware that some people may find this difficult.
2. Ask open questions. These are questions that don’t have a simple yes or no answer. A closed question could be “have you been on a walk before?” whilst an open question could be “can you tell me about any walks you have been on before?”
3. Check with the person that you understand what they are saying, “the TV isn’t working? Have I got that right?”
4. If the person wants to take you to show you something, go with them.
5. Be attentive. They may tell you things by their body language and facial expressions.
6. Learn from experience. You will need to be more observant and don’t feel awkward about asking parents/carers for their help.
7. Try drawing. Even if your drawing is not great it might still be helpful.
8. Take your time, don’t rush speaking to them. Put enough time aside to make sure they have understood what they have to do.
9. Use gestures and facial expressions. If you are asking if someone is unhappy make your facial expression unhappy to reinforce what you are saying. Do your best to do this in a natural way to avoid being patronising.
10. Be aware that some people find it easier to use real objects to communicate but photos and pictures can really help too.

Frequently asked questions

I don’t understand what the person is trying to tell me?
Firstly don’t panic or get embarrassed. Start by asking the person to repeat what they have said, tell them you don’t understand what they are saying and ask if they can use another word, write it down or show you. If you are still stuck ask them if they can tell another person who may be able to help you understand.

Make sure you are asking the right question to get an answer. If someone can only answer with a yes or know you will need to ask closed questions. For example don’t ask “what do you want to drink?” rather ask “do you want this drink (show it) or this one (show it)?”

The person may not be able to communicate in a clear manner, so care must be taken before starting the walk to agree how communication will take place.

**How do I handle a situation where the individual doesn’t stop talking, wants my attention all the time or keeps interrupting me?**

All sorts of people talk a lot; it does not mean they have a learning disability. You may need to use other communication skills you have to ensure that they understand you have other people to talk to and can’t just talk to them all the time. For many people with a learning disability this may be the highlight of their week and they may be very excited. Or it may be the only time in the week they are out of their home environment and meeting new people.

Try pairing them with others on the walk or mixing the groups people naturally fall into when walking so they get an opportunity to talk to different people.

**Can I insist a support worker/carer comes?**

No and Yes! – under mental capacity laws if a person has capacity to make the decision to attend a walk independently that is their decision and it must be respected. However, under health and safety laws if you can prove that the safety of the group may be at risk you may be able to request a support worker/carer.

You could suggest someone comes with the person for the first walk so you can get to know them and build your confidence.

**References**


**Further reading**

Mencap has produced a history of learning disability “Changing attitudes”.