

A young person with Down syndrome is shown in profile, looking intently at a drawing held by an adult's hands. The young person is wearing a green and white striped shirt. The drawing is colorful and abstract, featuring green, blue, and pink. The background is a soft, out-of-focus indoor setting.

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**RESOURCE**

# **Learning Difficulties / Learning Disabilities**

Effective support for young  
people with additional needs

# Learning Difficulties / Learning Disabilities

*“Learning difficulty includes young people who have ‘specific learning difficulties’, for example dyslexia, but who do not have a significant general impairment of intelligence.”*

(SOURCE: DofE)

*“A learning disability is a reduced intellectual ability and difficulty with everyday activities”*

(SOURCE: Mencap)

Young people with learning difficulties or learning disabilities have more difficulties than others when dealing with new situations or changing or complicated issues. These difficulties will be more than those experienced by their peers without learning difficulties.

They can range from being just a little behind their peers to having severe learning disabilities, some possibly linked to other conditions or disabilities. It is important to note, however, that while some young people with other conditions may also have learning difficulties, not all young people with other conditions do.



## Key issues

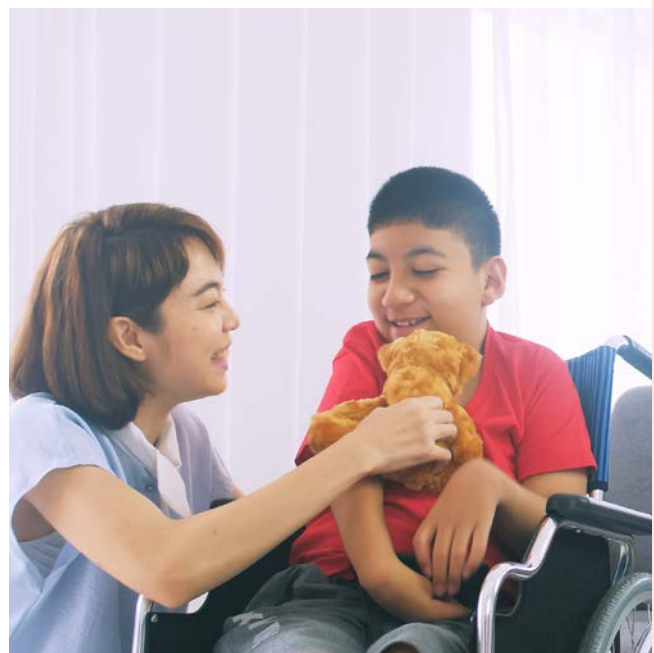
- Difficulties with coping with new situations.
- Problems understanding complicated or changing issues.
- Lower ability to process information than their peers.
- Often learning at a level much younger than their physical age.
- May have limited reading ability or not be able to read at all.
- Can sometimes be linked to behavioural problems.
- Possibly linked to other conditions/disabilities.

# Support strategies for your group

- **Provide information which is easy to understand, simple and clear.**
- **Find out if the young person uses sign language or symbols to aid understanding** (e.g. Makaton or Sign-A-Long) and if possible integrate this into the materials that you prepare for the young person. Many young people with learning difficulties will not be able to read much, if at all.
- **Keep talks short.** Five minutes might be all that the young person can comfortably manage. Mix it up with songs, craft, drama etc. to add variety and keep interest.
- **If a young person becomes noisy, moves around,** or shows other non-conventional behaviour, try to be patient while helping the young person to re-engage with the programme in a different way. Also be understanding when a young person doesn't pick up on 'normal' activity or instructions straight away.
- **If your team make-up allows,** and especially if there is someone in your team with suitable experience, it may be helpful to **provide one-to-one assistance**

for a young person with learning difficulties/disabilities.

- If one-to-one help is not a realistic option, **try to take extra time when explaining** something and don't show signs of impatience.
- Again, if one-to-one help is not realistic, **appoint someone in the team to look out for if the general needs of the young person** e.g. *if they need to go to the toilet, if there is a fire alarm or other emergency etc.*
- **Get to know the parents/carers** and find out from them how you can be more supportive.



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**Further Information:** Mencap UK [mencap.org.uk/learning-disability-explained/what-learning-disability](https://www.mencap.org.uk/learning-disability-explained/what-learning-disability)

Research shows that young people with additional needs are more likely to be abused than their peers (NSPCC) This increased vulnerability is due to a number of factors including communication differences, increased dependence on caregivers, social isolation and a higher likelihood that warning signs would be missed or misinterpreted. As a youth leader it's therefore important to be especially alert to changes in behaviour and wellbeing and discuss any concerns with a safeguarding lead at the earliest opportunity.



**This resource is just one  
of the many ways we're  
here to walk with you!**

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disciplining young people.

[urbansaints.org](https://urbansaints.org)

This resource has been adapted from our Invited to Belong Team Training Kit.



If you're interested in helping your team become more aware and welcoming of young people with additional needs, you can explore our Invited to Belong Team Training Kit at [urbansaints.org/resources](https://urbansaints.org/resources)

The original content of this resource was created in partnership with **Youthscape** as part of the Invited to Belong resource.