

Reporting without prejudice

A journalist's guide to writing about learning disability and Mencap



Question: What's the biggest barrier to people with a learning disability getting a fair deal in society?

Answer: Ignorance...most people don't even know what a learning disability is.

This is where you – the media – can play your part in our fight for a fair deal for people with a learning disability...by helping the wider world understand learning disability.

First things first... who are we?

Mencap is the UK's leading charity working with people with a learning disability and their families and carers.

We work together to campaign for change – so that people with a learning disability and their families and carers get a fair deal in society.

We also support people with advice and information, and a range of high quality services, like housing, education, employment and leisure.

...turn the page to see how you can play your part in fighting for a fair deal for people with a learning disability...





Writing about learning disability – how to get it right

There are many different types of learning disability – they can be mild, moderate, severe or profound, but all are lifelong. They affect people's ability to learn, communicate or do everyday things. Some learning disabilities are caused by inherited conditions – the best known example being Down's syndrome. But the causes of most learning disabilities are not known.

People with a learning disability find it harder to learn and understand than other people. As a result, some need support with everyday practical skills like getting dressed or cooking, or social skills like holding a conversation. Others with a more severe or profound learning disability may require 24-hour care, particularly those with additional physical disabilities. Many people with a learning disability, however, live independent lives.

It's important to understand that people with a learning disability are individuals with their own personalities, likes and dislikes, goals and ambitions. **A learning disability does not prevent someone from learning and achieving a lot in life, if given the right support.**

...and what a learning disability is not:

- X** a mental illness – though, just like everyone else, someone with a learning disability may have mental health problems
- X** a disease – learning disability is not contagious and it doesn't mean that someone is ill or unhealthy
- X** a mental handicap – most people with a learning disability find this outmoded term offensive

(NB 'Learning difficulty' is a broad term that encompasses things like dyslexia – which are undoubtedly difficulties, but do not constitute a 'disability'.)



**Want to know more about learning disability and
Then just ask us: call the press office on 020 7696**

Don't just take our word for it...take it from someone with a learning disability

Mencap believes passionately in involving people with a learning disability in our work. That's why we're keen for you in the media to speak directly to people with a learning disability about their experiences and opinions. To find out more, call us on 020 7696 5524 or email press@mencap.org.uk

In the meantime, here are some helpful hints on interviewing someone with a learning disability. The key point here is that you may need to make some adjustments to the way you usually run an interview – but without patronising people in any way.

1. Avoid jargon.
2. Speak clearly, using plain English.
3. Make sure the interview environment is comfortable – not too noisy, accessible and free from distraction. Allow more time for your interview than normal so that your interviewee doesn't feel rushed into giving answers.
4. If your interviewee is with a support worker, make sure you address – and listen to – the person with a learning disability first. Don't direct all of your questions to the support worker! However, you may need to ask the support worker for help if you don't understand something.
5. If you are unsure that your interviewee has understood your question, try rephrasing it using simpler language.
6. If your interviewee does not understand you, give practical examples of what you are trying to explain. Likewise, if you do not understand your interviewee, don't be embarrassed. Ask them to give you examples.
7. Explain any recording equipment you might have before you start the interview. That way your interviewee will not be distracted by it.
8. If you need to communicate using any form of written material, use a large font and double spacing. For more information on accessibility please visit www.mencap.org.uk/accessibility



**Mencap? Need a comment on a hot topic in the news?
5524 or email press@mencap.org.uk**

For more information...

Press office

If you want more information about Mencap or learning disability, or would like to interview a spokesperson or get a comment from us on a particular topic, please contact:

- England – phone 020 7696 5524 or email press@mencap.org.uk
- Northern Ireland – phone 028 9069 0154 or email mencapni@mencap.org.uk
- Wales – phone 029 2074 7588 or email information.wales@mencap.org.uk

Helpline and information services

Mencap also runs two highly responsive information services that can answer any specific questions you may have about learning disability services and issues:

The Learning Disability Helpline is a free, confidential service for anyone who wants information or advice on anything to do with learning disability in England.

Freephone: 0808 808 1111 Email: help@mencap.org.uk

Fax: 020 7608 3254 Textphone: 0808 808 8181

Post: Learning Disability Helpline, 123 Golden Lane, London EC1Y 0RT

- Learning Disability Helpline in Wales:
phone 0808 8000 300 or email information.wales@mencap.org.uk
- Information Service in Northern Ireland:
phone 0845 7636 227 or email mencapni@mencap.org.uk

Ask Mencap is a new website for anyone wanting to know more about learning disability issues. It's packed with really useful information, including:

- factsheets on learning disability issues, like education and health
- details of local and national organisations and services
- easy-to-read pages with pictures and sound, designed and produced by and for people with a learning disability.

www.askmencap.info

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