



BRIEFING SHEET

Working with Learners with Physical Disabilities or Impairments

Introduction

This briefing sheet is one of a series that were developed by NIACE on behalf of the DIUS to support work-based learning practitioners when they are working with learners who have a learning difficulty or disability. The other briefing sheets may be found at:

www.niace.org.uk/research/workplacelearning/Publications.htm

Each briefing sheet is designed to offer a brief explanation of a learning difficulty or disability, indicate how it may affect learning in the workplace, and offer some practical suggestions for practitioners about how they may support learners, alongside a case study.

In every instance we advocate using a person-centred approach, where the learner and their particular strengths and interests are placed at the centre of the learning and assessment process. More information about using a person-centred approach may be downloaded at:

<http://excellence.qia.org.uk/pdf/Personcentred%20approaches%20and%20adults%20with%20learning%20difficulties.pdf>

What is a Physical Disability or Impairment?

A physical disability may happen to any person at any time. It can be temporary or permanent, fluctuating, stable or degenerative and may affect parts of the body or the whole of it.

There are three main groups of impairment:

- A congenital disability that occurs during pregnancy or at the birth e.g. Down's Syndrome, Cerebral Palsy;
- An inherited condition which has been passed on by a parent to the child e.g. Haemophilia, muscular dystrophy;
- Impairments that are acquired during life e.g. accidents (road traffic accidents), Polio, meningitis, physical abuse;

Sometimes a disability may be hidden, for example in the cases of epilepsy, diabetes or haemophilia.

In line with current practice, it is important to always use a person-centred approach when working with people with physical disabilities. They will have the same range of intellectual abilities as the population as a whole. Be sensitive to the terminology you use when addressing learners.

(*Access for All* (pages 37-38) has a list of useful approaches to consider when working with this group of learners.)

It is very difficult to generalise about the effects of a disability on a learner as each case is individual and specific to that particular person so **always** use the learner as a resource. People with disabilities are the best people to say what they can and cannot do.

Different cultures also have different concepts about disability and, as well as having very different ways of defining and managing disabilities, may also not identify with approaches currently used in the UK.

How does it affect work-based learning?

One of the most important factors in any successful work-based learning opportunity is linking the learner to a truly supportive supervisor. They may require training or awareness-raising on disability issues at first. Contact with an organisation such as SKILL (see sources of information) will put staff in touch with people who can help.

The initial barrier experienced by some people with physical disabilities is actually getting to and into the place of learning or work. For many, the inaccessibility of buildings is a problem, so there are important questions to ask at the outset:

- Are there any resources available that might make the work situation better for the learner?
- Is an accessible toilet required and available?
- What other adaptations might be required to make it easier?
- Would a different chair be better?
- Is the height of the work surface suitable for the required task?
- Certain simple adjustments might make a lot of difference, for example seating at a different height, some kind of arm rest, or thick books under a computer to raise its height.

In order to maximise the learner's potential staff need to be clear about the learner's profile of abilities and needs in the following areas:

Cognitive level- what is the capability of the learner and their likely range of knowledge and learning?

Linguistic and the form of communication used – What level of language and speech does the learner have and is there any resource used to help the learner communicate?

An awareness of the practical support required.

What can I do to help?

- Establish an effective method of communication in whatever format is appropriate for that learner. Familiarise yourself with whatever communication system is in use.
- Plan the arrangement of, and adaptations to, furniture and learning resources.
- Make instructions specific and concrete. Make sure the learner understands what has to be done – if possible by a clear demonstration.
- Provide a checklist of strategies that is available to everyone involved with the learner, including reception staff and canteen staff.
- Detailed observation of a learner can provide valuable information about their progress and needs that can inform the review process. Build in time to do some observation.
- Acknowledge their disability and its implications for the learner.
- Always speak directly to the learner and if applicable on the same physical level. e.g. bend down to eye level if talking to a wheelchair user.
- Remember to apply to the relevant awarding body for appropriate assessment arrangements, such as extra time, where applicable.

Case Study

Sean is a young man of 30 who has cerebral palsy –left hemiplegia (only one side of the body paralysed). Sean’s speech is very slow and slurred and he writes very slowly and not very clearly. He walks with a rolling gait but does not need any crutches or aids.

Sean went to a Special School for children with physical disabilities. It became apparent early on that Sean was very able and, when given a communicator and a laptop for writing, was able to transfer to a mainstream school which had both physiotherapy and speech therapy available. His transfer to a mainstream school was planned carefully and both the tutor and the whole group received some disability awareness training and were informed about Sean’s condition from staff at the special school. Specifically, that it was not a progressive condition and was not catching! Being included and having daily contact with his mainstream peers improved Sean’s confidence and aspirations considerably.

He left school with 4 good GCSEs and went to an FE college on a NVQ childcare course His choice of a childcare course initially raised concern amongst college staff but a co-ordinated approach with everyone working with Sean, including the therapists resulted in a work placement with very young children in an “After School” club, where his disability was totally accepted. The young children made allowances for his slower speech and his way of walking partly because his work was so efficient and he was so considerate to everyone. He soon became very popular and was offered a full time job as a Youth Worker’s assistant. The early years of co-ordinated working with all the professionals involved with Sean’s life enabled this successful outcome.

Assistive Technology

It is important to explore suitably adapted resources and equipment with the learner themselves. It may be that the learner has specialist equipment already available to them which can be transferred to the workplace or the learning environment.

Common technology to help people with physical disabilities include:

- Alternative and modified keyboards
- On-screen and touch screen keyboards
- Input devices and switch systems
- Specialist mice and tracker balls
- Screen reading software
- Voice input systems
- Magnification software
- Speech recognition systems
- CCTV reader (See section on Sources of Further Information and Support)

DDA

Many learners who have a learning difficulty or disability are protected by the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) and subsequent legislation. They may be protected as both employees and as learners. In every case, a learner's disability or learning difficulty must meet the criteria described in the Act:

“Subject to the provisions of Schedule 1, a person has a disability for the purposes of this Act if he has a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.”

(DDA, 1995)

Further information about disability legislation and its application in the workplace or in learning may be found at: <http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/Pages/default.aspx>

Sources of Further Information and Support

SKILL, the National Bureau for students with Disabilities

Chapter House

18-20 Crucifix Lane

London SE1 3JW

www.skill.org.uk

Employment Opportunities for People with Disabilities

53 New Broad Street

London EC2M 1SL

www.opportunities.org.uk

Scope (Support with cerebral palsy)

6 Market Road

London N7 9PW

www.scope.org.uk

RADAR (Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation)

12 City Forum

250 City Road

London EC1V 8AF

www.radar.org.uk

Access for All-Guidance on Making the Adult Literacy and Numeracy Core Curricula Accessible:

London DfES 2001

LSDA Project: Improving Work Based Learning for People with Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities

Nottingham Training Network ; Carla Tudbury (2006)

New Rights to Learn: A tutor guide to teaching adults after The Disability Discrimination Act Part 4: NIACE 2003.

Its Not as Simple as You Think: Cultural Viewpoints around Disability: Skills for Life DfES 2006

Skills for Life: The National Strategy for Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy Skills: Skills for Working; Supporting the development of literacy, language and numeracy skills for learners with learning difficulties or disabilities in a vocational context. DfES 2006

Alternatives and modified keyboards: www.abilitynet.org.uk

Alternative styles of keyboard: www.keytools.com/keyboards

Touch-screens: www.keytools.com/touchscreens.asp

Skills for Access: www.skillsforaccess.org.uk