

## What are Specific Learning Differences? (SpLDs)

Sometimes known as specific learning difficulties, these are now more positively referred to as differences, a term which recognises the strengths shown by many of those affected. They do not affect intelligence or creative skills.

**Dyslexia** is a particular combination of abilities and difficulties affecting the processing of information, especially its speed, detail and order. Generally, dyslexia means that an affected person's reading, writing and working memory do not reflect their ability and understanding, as shown in speech or practical tasks. For more detail, see NIACE Briefing sheet 76  
[http://www.niace.org.uk/services/information/briefing\\_sheets](http://www.niace.org.uk/services/information/briefing_sheets)

**Dyspraxia** is a difficulty with the planning and organisation of movement, so that affected people often find the routine tasks of daily life such as driving, household chores, cooking and grooming difficult. Associated with this may be problems of language, perception and thought, commonly seen in difficulties with organisation. (adapted from Dyspraxia Foundation)

Other SpLDs include Asperger's syndrome and attention deficit disorder.

**Dyscalculia** affects the ability to acquire arithmetical skills. These learners may have difficulty understanding simple number concepts, lack an intuitive grasp of number, and have trouble learning number facts and procedures. People with dyscalculia experience great difficulty with the most basic aspects of number and arithmetic. (adapted from DfES)



## BRIEFING SHEET

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# Working with learners who have specific learning differences

## 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](http://www.niace.org.uk/research/workplacelearning/Publications.htm)

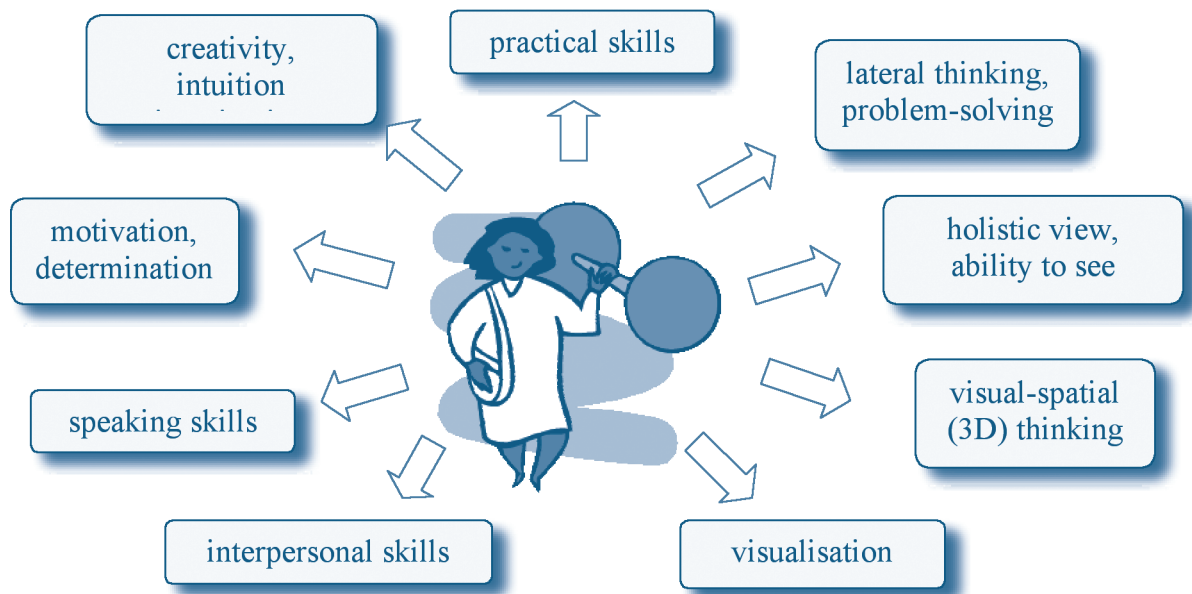
Each briefing sheet is designed to offer a brief explanation of a learning difficulty or disability, indicate how it may affect learning in the workplace, and offer some practical suggestions for practitioners about how they may support learners alongside a case study.

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/Person-centred%20approaches%20and%20adults%20with%20learning%20%20%20%20%20%20%20difficulties.pdf>

## How does a learning difference affect work-based learning?

**Strengths** People with learning differences tend to think differently, and this can be a real asset. Their thinking style is sometimes called a “right hemisphere” thinking style. Some strengths commonly associated with learning differences are:



## Difficulties

People with learning differences are just as individual as everybody else, so while they share some core characteristics with others affected by dyslexia, dyspraxia etc, there may also be many differences. However, most people will show otherwise inexplicable **discrepancies** (e.g. between oral and written performance, practical and literacy abilities, memory and understanding), and **persistence of difficulties** in spite of ordinary teaching and communication methods. In addition, they may show some, or all, of the following:

## Dyslexia

- short concentration span
- slow reading and writing
- confusion between left and right
- difficulties with organisation and order
- losing track of time, being late or missing deadlines



- trouble remembering, needing to re-read or hear again
- messy or illegible handwriting, jumbling or reversing letters
- confused order and unclear expression of written and/or spoken ideas
- trouble multi-tasking, such as listening and taking messages or notes

## **Dyspraxia – most of the above, plus:**

- Weak gross motor co-ordination e.g. clumsiness, problems with posture and balance, driving, riding a bike
- Weak fine motor co-ordination e.g. with writing, typing, using cutlery, domestic chores, using keys, dressing, grooming
- In speech, may interrupt, repeat or stumble over some words; may not be able to control pitch, volume and rate of speech
- May be over-sensitive to light and sound, weak perception of nonverbal signals

## **Dyscalculia**

- Number tasks do not become automatic e.g. use of fingers
- Time perception difficulties e.g. estimating time, affecting planning ability
- Difficulty learning to tell the time
- Difficulties planning and sequencing tasks, and being organised



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## What can I do to help?

### Create a positive learning environment

- Give as much time as practicable and avoid pressure as much as possible.
- Make a quiet place to work available, with natural daylight, if possible.
- Allow regular breaks, especially from the PC screen, e.g. a change of task.
- Allow learners to do one thing at a time, avoiding multi-tasking.
- Minimise interruptions and distraction from noise or movement.

**Focus on goals** - allow individuals to choose or experiment with different ways of achieving them.

### Present material in multi-sensory ways

- visually – pictures, diagrams, charts, colour-coding
- auditorially – discussion, explanation, repetition, stories, drama, dialogue
- kinaesthetically – experiences, practical activities, visits, tactile materials
- “right hemisphere” learning – e.g. music, humour, intuition, visualisation, imagination

### Be holistic

- introduce the big picture first, then the detail
- link back from examples to the principle
- give lots of concrete examples

### Make the learning process explicit

- Discuss why material is being presented, what skills or information are to be learned, show links to what has already been learned.
- Discuss how to learn – what strategies have worked before, how to build on them.
- Encourage lots of practice and individual meaningful connections.

### Allow learners to take control of their own learning

- offer a variety of ways to learn
- encourage pair and group learning and feedback
- encourage self-correction
- allow learners to “teach” each other to check their own learning

### Encourage the development of learning skills

- explain and discuss language – jargon, idioms, new vocabulary
- break learning into small steps – ask for feedback after each
- encourage learners to ask questions
- explain and demonstrate how to do tasks
- give models so learners know what they are aiming for

### Give specific help with organisation, structure, memory, note-taking, number, reading and writing

## Case study



Keisha is a young social care worker for a charitable organisation. Having left school with few qualifications, she started work as a care assistant and now wants to achieve Health & Social Care NVQs, so she can progress in her career. She is a well-motivated, has excellent practical skills and gets along well with her clients. She has always had great difficulty with reading, writing, memory and organisation, although she has never been assessed as dyslexic. Here are her own descriptions of her difficulties, with the action taken.

*“I can manage reading for myself, if I have enough time and a quiet place, but if I have to read something on the spot, I start to panic. The other day my manager asked me to look at a care plan and suggest some ideas for the client, right then and there! I couldn't do it, and felt a complete idiot ”*

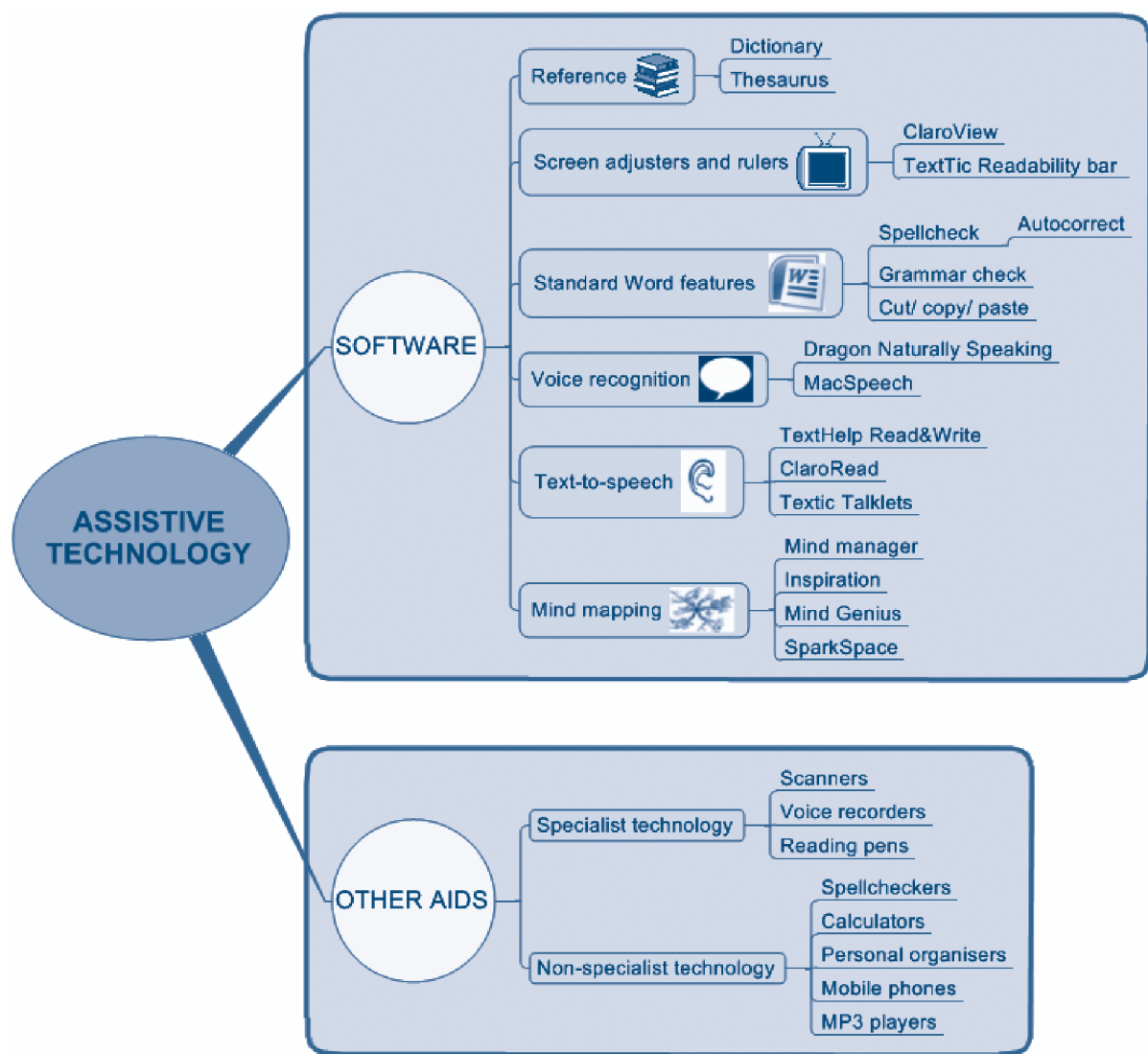
- Keisha was given reasonable time to read materials before having to act on them.
- A dyslexia specialist was asked to deliver training to the managers at one of their regular meetings, so they understood the effects of dyslexia and ways they could help their staff.

*“I've been collecting evidence for my portfolio, but all the papers are muddled up and I just don't know how to even start getting them organised. The worst thing is I'm not sure what I have and haven't documented now, and I have no idea how to work it out. I sometimes fell like giving up the whole thing. ”*

- Keisha and her assessor keep a clear, colour-coded chart and mark items each time evidence is added.
- Much of Keisha's evidence has been recorded by the assessor to minimise the strain on Keisha's weak writing skills.
- Keisha has been able to write up some of her evidence using a computer with a spell-checker.

*“Sometimes my manager asks me to do a whole load of jobs, and by the time I've done the first one or two, I've forgotten what the others were. She's disappeared, everyone else is busy and I feel completely lost. ”*

- The proposed training would make the manager more aware of the desirability of giving instructions in shorter chunks.
- Keisha could check instructions by repeating them back to the manager (if they were not too long).
- She could either make a few short notes or ask the manager to write some (if the instructions were longer).
- Repeated complex tasks were outlined with clear instructions or a checklist on colour-coded cards.



## Disability Discrimination legislation

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**

Department for Education and Skills (2004) A Framework for Understanding Dyslexia, <http://excellence.qia.org.uk/page.aspx?o=124856> (available free)

V. Goodwin and B. Thomson (2004) Making Dyslexia Work for You: a self-help guide

Mary Colley (2006) Living with Dyspraxia: a guide for adults

British Dyslexia Association.

[www.bdadyslexia.org.uk](http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk)

Useful strategies

[www.dyslexia-adults.com](http://www.dyslexia-adults.com)

[www.beingdyslexic.co.uk](http://www.beingdyslexic.co.uk)

Technological aids

[www.dyslexic.com](http://www.dyslexic.com)

Dyspraxia

[www.dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk](http://www.dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk)

Dyscalculia

[www.dyscalculiainfo.org/index.htm](http://www.dyscalculiainfo.org/index.htm)

Attention deficit disorder

[www.add.org](http://www.add.org)

Asperger's syndrome

[www.udel.edu/bkirby/asperger](http://www.udel.edu/bkirby/asperger)