

## Module 2: Working with Deaf and Deaf-Blind Adults with Learning Disabilities

### Introduction:

Up to 60% of adults in literacy classes have a learning disability. These learners have very big challenges upgrading their literacy skills. Practitioners also face this challenge when they teach and want to know how to give these learners the right kind of help.

In fact, most practitioners want to learn more about:

- how to identify different kinds of learning disabilities
- how to do a quick screen test if they think a learner has a learning disability
- what strategies work best and what accommodations are best for the different learning disabilities

This module will help practitioners learn and understand more about learning disabilities (LD), and what **strategies\*** and **accommodations\*** will work best for learners with LDs.

\* A **strategy** is a carefully planned way to handle a task. It is what you will do to solve a problem.

\* An **accommodation** is a different way to do a task. It uses a learner's strengths to work around the learner's areas of need. Accommodations can be as simple as using your fingers to do math – or as complex as using a voice activated computer that types spoken language.

## Understanding Learning Disabilities

### What a learning disability is:

A learning disability is a **real** disability. A person with a learning disability doesn't get better. There is no "cure" for learning disabilities.

### What a learning disability is not:

Learning disability does not mean low intelligence. It is not mental illness. It is not some kind of autism.

### Definitions of Learning Disabilities:

A learning disability is a problem that affects how the brain learns. Most people with learning disabilities have normal intelligence (or higher) but struggle to learn. For some reason, the brain has trouble with one or more of these processes:

- taking in new information
- processing information
- remembering information
- responding to information

Most often, the problem is with understanding or using written, spoken, or signed language, but there are other kinds of learning disabilities.

## Differences between LD, DD, ADD, ADHD, and Brain Injury

### LD = Learning Disability

Learning disabilities usually affect people with normal intelligence. They may be very good at some subjects and fail others. For example: be very good at English and communication but cannot do simple math.

**DD = Developmental Disability**

A developmental disability usually affects all areas of learning. People with **DD** have lower than normal intelligence.

**ADD = Attention Deficit Disorder**

Learners with ADD tend to be quiet in class. They often day-dream, not paying attention to the practitioner.

**ADHD = Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder**

60 to 80% of people with attention deficit disorder (with or without hyperactivity) have a learning disability. But, a learning disorder is **not** the same thing as **ADHD**.

**Brain Injury**

Brain injury can cause many different kinds of problems, depending on the part of the brain and the amount that is damaged. No two brain injuries are exactly the same. Brain injuries can affect a person's ability to communicate, understand, write, and read.

**Causes of learning disabilities:**

Some professionals explain that having a learning disability is like having a few wires mixed up in the brain. Those pathways cannot be used in the normal way. The learning disability can affect different parts of the brain and can be mild to severe.

We don't really know the specific cause of learning disabilities, but it is possible they are caused by:

- Heredity. LDs tend to run in families.
- Problems during pregnancy or childbirth.
- Accidents after birth.

## Why there are so many LD learners in our classes:

Research shows that:

- 10% of the population probably has learning disabilities
- Up to 60% of adults in literacy classes probably have learning disabilities

## How learning disabilities affect an adult's daily life:

Most adults with learning disabilities tend to find ways to adapt. They have “normal” lives (job, family, hobbies, and relationships). They are intelligent and successful, but they still struggle everyday with their learning disabilities.

Some people with learning disabilities are not very successful and tend to fail at work and relationships. Often, these are the people who come to our literacy programs for help.

The National Centre for Adult Literacy and Learning Disabilities made this list. **How learning disabilities can affect an adult's life:**

**Self-Esteem** – Being teased or rejected because of failures leaves the person with low self-esteem. They tend to stop trying to succeed. They usually do not advocate for themselves.

**Education** – Learning disabilities can affect the person's ability to succeed at school. Teachers often don't understand their disability or know how to accommodate their needs.

**Work** – Because they may have poor reading and writing skills, this person makes mistakes on job applications. Some learning disabilities may cause problems with the person's ability to organize their time, use language, socialize, or pay attention.

**Social Skills** – Adults with learning disabilities may have problems understanding other people's feelings. For example, they may say the

wrong things or behave in an inappropriate way. This makes it hard for the adult to keep a job or have long-term relationships.

**Independent Living** – Responsibilities like writing cheques, filling out forms, or taking messages can be difficult for the person with learning disabilities. They may need help from other people sometimes.

### **Important message for learners and practitioners:**

How would you feel if you found out YOU had a learning disability?

People can react in different ways, but it does not have to be a terribly negative experience. For example, some people have said they felt relief to know they weren't "just lazy or stupid". It helped them to know the reason why they struggle to learn some things. Other people become upset when they find out they have a learning disability.

You can support learners with learning disabilities by telling them these four important points:

1. Having a learning disability is not your fault. You didn't do anything wrong.
2. Having a learning disability does not mean you are stupid. You **can** learn.
3. Having a learning disability means you are normal.
4. It also means you learn things in different ways than most other people.

New practitioners working with LD learners need to remember these points:

- You can't "fix" a learning disability.
- Be flexible and patient. Keep trying different strategies until you find one that works.
- Help them learn to give you feedback about the strategies you use.

- Learners with LDs are all different. Take time to understand each learner.
- Expect the learner to have good days and bad days.
- Strategies you use with LD learners will work with all learners.

### Two BIG mistakes:

1. **“If I try hard, maybe I can fix it.”** – No. Even the best teacher in the world **cannot** “fix” learning disabilities.
2. After assessing the LD learner, you see there are many gaps in their education (missing knowledge and skills). What should you do?

Go back to basics and teach it all over again. Try to fill in the gaps. Help them catch up.

or

Accommodate them with the skills they have now, and go forward. The gaps will fill in themselves.

The correct answer is:

**Accommodate them with the skills they have now, and go forward. The gaps will fill in themselves.**

## Identifying Learning Disabilities

### LD screening and diagnostic testing:

Practitioners want to know how to identify learning disabilities. They want to help their learners be more successful in their studies. Many practitioners think having an LD screening tool would be great. But experts warn a screening tool is not the same as a full assessment for learning disabilities. Results from screening tools can be wrong.

For example, some “obvious signs” of LD may really be caused by medications or health problems. Practitioners must be careful not to “jump” when screening for learning disabilities.

Practitioners can use informal screening checklists to see if their learner **may** have a learning disability. **A certified professional** can do a formal assessment for learning disabilities. Only they **can diagnose** a learning disability.

### **Signs of possible learning disabilities:**

There are a few good screening lists practitioners can use. You can find them on the internet and print them for your own use. Here is an example of what a quick screen tool might look like:

#### **The Learner:**

- has normal (or higher) intelligence, but scores much lower than expected on some tasks; and does not progress as expected
- some days seems to understand, other days does not
- gets frustrated easily
- can only pay attention for a short time; is easily distracted
- has poor memory; gets confused easily
- starts the task before instructions are done
- misunderstands language; doesn't fully understand what others say
- tells personal information that is not appropriate
- cannot read or write at age appropriate level
- does not read documents before signing them
- mixes up words and letters that are similar (was, saw, p, q)
- often goes off the point in conversations
- confuses right, left, up, down
- writes some letters and numbers backwards

- has difficulty with math and math concepts
- has trouble following directions
- misses the point in discussions
- has on-going problems with written sentence structure
- has a hard time seeing things from another person's perspective
- has social skills that are not age appropriate (pouting, refusing to work)
- has poor self-esteem, negative attitude, low self-confidence
- is anxious, depressed; afraid to take risks or make mistakes
- gives up easily

No one will have all of these signs of learning disability. The adult with many of these characteristics **may** have a learning disability. If the learner has many of these characteristics and they are severe, they may benefit from an assessment from a qualified professional.

## Specific Learning Disabilities

### **Issues in diagnosing Deaf or Deaf-Blind Individuals:**

There is still a lack of understanding of learning disabilities in Deaf and Deaf-Blind Adults. There are not enough standardized tools or qualified assessors yet.

### **How the brain processes information for new learning:**

We learn new things in many different ways. For learning literacy, we must use language – read, write, math, and communicate expressively and receptively. The brain uses a special series of tasks to process language. If the brain cannot do one or more of these tasks, a person cannot learn in the “normal” way.



## How language is normally processed in the brain:

In literacy learning, the brain must be able to do these steps:

- receive the new information
- understand it
- store it (connect it to other related information)
- get the information back (recall it, find it in the brain)
- express the information (write it, speak it, sign it)

## Kinds of learning disabilities:

There are many kinds of learning disabilities. They can affect different areas in a person's life. For example:

- **Academic skills disorders**

- **Developmental reading disorder** (dyslexia) – problems with reading, making sense of written language
- **Developmental writing disorder** (dysgraphia) – problems with handwriting or with writing in a way that makes sense to others or yourself
- **Developmental arithmetic disorder** (dyscalculia) – problems with calculations or abstract mathematical concepts

- **Speech and language disorders**

- **Development articulation disorder** – problems making speech sounds, pronouncing certain letter combinations
- **Developmental expressive language disorder** – problems using spoken language to communicate, express yourself verbally
- **Developmental receptive language disorder** (auditory processing disorder) – problems understanding what other people say; hear the words but don't process them as thoughts

- **Other learning disabilities**
  - **Visual processing disorder** – problems making sense of information taken in through the eyes
  - **Developmental motor skill disorder** (dyspraxia) – problems with fine motor skills, clumsy with tools and own fingers
  - **Nonverbal learning disorder** – problems understanding nonverbal communication; this person is very good with language but has trouble with social, organizational, and motor skills

### **Disabilities in visual picture, visual language, and organizational processing:**

The three learning disabilities practitioners deal with most often in the literacy classroom are:

1. disabilities in visual perception, as with pictures
2. disabilities in visual language perception
3. disabilities in organization

## **Finding Right Strategies**

### **Why there can be no magic solution:**

With any group of LD learners, there are many variables. It is impossible to develop a magic-fix that will fit all your learners. That does not mean that we cannot work with LD learners in groups, but we will need to:

- vary our teaching styles to match the different needs of our learners
- keep experimenting with new strategies until we find what works with individual learners

A **strategy** is a carefully planned way to handle a task. It is what you will do to solve a problem. The practitioner's job is to guide their learners to effective strategies for solving literacy-related problems.

### **How do you choose the best strategies?**

- Find the learner's preferred learning style and develop training using the learner's strengths.
- Identify what learning disabilities the learner may have. Research those disabilities and find what works best for that disability.
- Learn from the learner. See what works and what doesn't work with the learner.
- Plan your lesson materials. Think about what you can do help your learner use those successful strategies.

## **Planning ahead**

### **Visual Picture LD - General strategies:**

- Reduce and visual distractions in the classroom as much as possible.
- Make sure the room is well lit.
- Have the learner sit away from visual distractions, i.e. not beside windows, bookshelves, an open doorway.
- Have the learner sit near you when teaching.
- Make printed material more visually friendly. For example:
  - enlarge text (18 pt or larger depending on the individual)
  - use a good clear font (not script)
  - use headings
  - use coloured paper to reduce glare
  - double spacing text
  - use arrows
  - use clear language

- Reinforce what you write on the board by signing after you write.
- Use verbal clues and visual aids.
- Repeat and check for understanding.
- Use lined paper.
- Provide extra time to complete written work.
- Allow the learner to use assistive devices as required.
- Teach learners how to ask for help without feeling stupid.

### **Visual Language LD - General strategies:**

In the case of Deaf and Deaf-Blind learners, we will modify the strategies for “hearing” language to “taking in” language using ASL. These strategies are only suggestions as there has not yet been enough research into strategies for Deaf and Deaf-Blind LD learners.

- Have the learner sit away from distractions, i.e. not beside open windows, an open doorway, other learners.
- Make sure you have the learner’s full attention before starting.
- Keep good eye contact with the learner.
- Don’t try to give instructions when other people are talking.
- Be careful with your signing and your body language:
  - Slow down a little but sign at a comfortable pace.
  - Sign clearly.
  - Give learners extra time to answer questions. (non-LD learners take 3-4 seconds; LD learners may take up to 10 seconds).
  - Keep your sentences short; don’t use complex sentences.
  - Use vocabulary that is not difficult, or vocabulary that is clearly understood by everyone.
  - Use signal words such as: “first”, “finally”, “this is important”.
  - Emphasize important words.
  - Use repetition.

- Repeat the main ideas and concepts, signing them in different ways.
- Break down the lesson into small bits instead of giving one long lesson.
- Use the whiteboard for notes, outlines, and lesson summaries.
- Keep discussion groups small. It's easier for LD learners to follow.
- Teach the learner how to ask for clarification. "You mean...?"

### **Organizational LD - General strategies:**

- Encourage the learners to use monthly calendars, weekly calendars and daily schedules.
- Encourage the use of "sticky notes" for a variety of purposes, i.e. as reminders "to do". (can use different colours for different tasks.)
- Clearly explain learning activities. Teach learners how to identify the tasks that must be done during the day and how to estimate the amount of time the tasks will take.
- Clearly explain how to prioritize and arrange tasks from what is most important to least important.
- Make sure learners know what to do and how to do it. Many LD learners get a very vague idea about a task ("I have to write an essay.") but have no idea about specifics or how to get started.
  - Make sure the learners have the skills and knowledge to do the task.
  - Clearly explain what to do.
  - Break the task into its smaller parts. Teach learners how to break down tasks into smaller parts themselves.
  - Put the parts in the order they need to be done.
  - For larger projects, give timelines with checkpoint dates along the way.

- Encourage the learners to discuss any difficulties they have as they proceed.
- Keep any due dates written on the whiteboard – use countdown days.
- Teach learners how to organize personal space for working.
- Teach learners how to use charts and diagrams for organizing information.
- Help the learners develop checklists to help remember the steps.
- Show how school and personal information can be organized using a system or other helpful tools - binders, dividers, datebooks, file folders in boxes, computers, whatever works best for them.
- Demonstrate how to use highlighters to colour-code notes, texts, and reading material.
- Set up a routine so the learner can know what will happen. Start each week by setting goals for the week and writing a plan for the week on a calendar. Model regular monitoring of the plan. “How did we do with the plan for the day? What did we accomplish? What do we need to do another day?”
- Allow learners to use spell-checkers, proofreaders, and calculators.

### **Memory LD – General Strategies:**

Students with learning disabilities often have trouble remembering basic information. Here are a few tips to help:

- Use the learner’s preferred learning style.
- Encourage the learner to visualize (imagine).
- Use index cards to make memory logs.
- Give the learner lots of time to learn new skills. Repeat and practice the new skills often.

- Use information mapping. Students can write the information they need to remember in different coloured boxes connected by arrows to show the relationship or link between one piece of information and another.
- Have learners draw pictures of the information they want to remember (use cartoon pictures, symbols, arrows, etc.).
- Use mental imaging to recall information. Ask learners to look at the mental picture they have created and talk about the information that they see in their mind.
- Create acronyms. Acronyms may be words or sentences that are created from the first letter of each word to be remembered. For example: used to remember the Great Lakes is “HOMES”: Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie and Superior.
- Use laminated checklists posters. Color-code them if possible.
- Have learners use graphic organizers to help them develop ideas and organize information for writing tasks.
- Use lots of visuals aids when you teach – drawings, pictures, maps, or graphs.

## Self Advocacy

### **Accommodations and assistance devices:**

An accommodation is a different way to do a task. It uses a learner's strengths to work around the learner's areas or need.

Accommodations are not cheating, but a way to make things fair.

Remember “fair is not equal”. If a person is Deaf, it is not unfair for that person to use a note taker while hearing people must write their own notes.

Accommodations can be as simple as using your fingers to do math – or as complex as using a voice activated computer that types spoken language.

**Sometimes accommodations are the only way the learner can do the task. When learning the skill is not the goal, or learning the skill is too stressful or difficult, then consider accommodations.**

### **Accommodations using assistive technology (AT):**

Assistive technology is any technical device that increases independence of a person with disability. AT allows learners to work around their disabilities and use their strengths.

Accommodations and assistive technologies are great in the literacy classroom! **But what happens when the LD learner leaves the program?** Will they be able to afford to pay for, repair, or continue to use these in everyday life? (For example: computer voice input, note-takers, etc.)

Many learners do continue to have access to AT accommodations if they go on to further education or apprenticeship training programs. They learner will need to have documents to identify their learning disabilities and recommended accommodations. (by a certified professional)

### **Skills for self-advocacy:**

What is self-advocacy? It is the ability to:

- stand up for yourself
- negotiate for yourself
- understand your own needs
- ask for, and get what you need
- access all the agencies and legal rights available

Practitioners can help adults learn to advocate for themselves.



**Anyone can become a self-advocate.** In fact, most of us already are self-advocates.

For example:

You know if you like carrots or not. If someone offers you carrots you know how you will respond. You know what kinds of clothes are comfortable for you and what movies you prefer. Other people understand and accept your preferences. This is self-advocacy.

In the same way, LD learners need to understand their strengths and weaknesses and what things can make their life and work more successful.

To be successful outside the literacy classroom, they will need to know how to express their needs to others. It is not enough to say, “I have a learning disability” to an employer. The learner must be able to explain what accommodations they need. “I have a learning disability. I can work better with a spell checker on my computer.”; “I can focus better if...”; “I can get more work done if...”; and so on.

Practitioners can help learners develop these skills is self-advocacy.

## Good Literacy Practices

### Effective Teaching for All Kinds of Learners:

#### **Establish a classroom of positive attitudes and values**

- All students can improve weak skills
- There are many different ways to learn
- It is more important to learn than to learn quickly
- Mistakes are okay
- Good students learn how to learn
- Encourage learners to communicate their needs by using journals and self-advocacy
- Permit learners to move around the classroom

### **Send a clear message**

- Establish eye contact
- Sign or speak clearly
- Reduce distractions
- Use visual and tactile learning materials
- Use large fonts and lots of white space
- Understand that remembering and following directions is difficult for some people
- Give enough time for learners to process what they are learning; be willing to repeat

### **Teach for Understanding**

- Explain why you are teaching something
- Be organized
- Use language markers such as “and lastly...”, “there are three main points...”
- Use real life examples and personal experiences
- Teach lessons in short sections
- Review and summarize often
- Apply skills to new or related situations

### **Use multi-sensory teaching techniques**

- Teach the same lesson in different ways
- Use visual and tactile techniques
- Use visual language techniques (ASL) and give learners opportunities to discuss the concepts
- Teach note taking skills and active listening
- For those who learn by doing, offer role-play and physical demonstrations
- Help students understand there are different ways of learning; help them recognize which are **their** best ways
- Use computers with learners who have trouble writing

**Clear structure**

- Use visual organizers
- Provide a written lesson plan or guideline
- Connect daily lessons to goals
- Give assignments in ASL and in writing
- Set up routines and schedules

**Feedback**

- Recognize that individuals need different amounts of practice
- Give feedback often
- Help learners understand their strengths and weaknesses
- Teach students self-evaluation

**Teach skills that are embedded in the material**

- Don't assume what learners know
- Teach how to use memory strategies
- Teach students how to be organized
- Teach essential skills to make them as automatic as possible

**Offer choices**

- Allow different types of assignments and tests
- Emphasize that working quickly is not most important
- Allow students to move to a quiet area to work if it is helpful to their needs

**Partners in learning**

- Involve students in creating a respectful classroom
- Give learners opportunities to question, explain, clarify
- Encourage students to connect what they are learning to their daily lives
- Teach learners how to set realistic goals

### **Be involved in the learning process**

- Develop ways to check if learners are understanding as you teach
- If a learner doesn't do their work, find out the reason why
- Provide opportunities for the learner to succeed

### **Direct Instruction**

This model was adapted from *Instruction: A Models Approach* (Gunter, Estes & Schwaab, 1995).

#### **Explain the goal, tell learners what you expect, then introduce the skill**

- A. Connect the lesson theme to something the learners already know
- B. Involve all learners
- C. Relate to real life
- D. Label the learning and set goals

#### **Instruction: Introduce and Model the Skill**

- A. Practitioner does it
- B. Practitioner does it; learners help
- C. Learners do it; practitioner helps
- D. Learners do it

### **Guided Practice with Feedback**

Learners practice their new skills (with supervision). This is a good opportunity for peer tutoring or group learning, especially with word problems.

#### **Closure**

- A. Tell me what you have learned
- B. Show me what you have learned
- C. Do one more.

## **Independent Practice and Generalization**

- A. Have the learners practice new skill independently
- B. Have learners review skill daily
- C. Be sure to apply this skill to home and work

LD learners may have different learning strengths. They will benefit from this direct way of teaching because it helps them to process information using different senses. Multi-sensory teaching is recognized as the best way to succeed with people who have learning problems.

For more information, see: The National Center for Learning Disabilities, [www.nclld.org](http://www.nclld.org)