

**SO  
YOUR  
NEXT  
PATIENT  
HAS A  
LEARNING  
DISABILITY?**

**A GUIDE  
FOR PHYSIOS  
NOT  
SPECIALISING  
IN LEARNING  
DISABILITIES**



**A learning disability** is a significant, lifelong condition that started before adulthood, that affected the person's development and which means they need help to understand new or complex information, learn new skills and cope independently.\*

\*The Same as You, 2000; Valuing People, 2001

**The majority of people** with a learning disability can successfully access mainstream physiotherapy services when reasonable adjustments are made.

## Planning and preparation for your appointment

**A person with a learning disability has individual needs like everyone else, however, the following suggestions may be helpful when preparing for your appointment.**

### Try to find out in advance

- Relevant medical history - they might not be able to remember or explain all the details you need
- Information relating to the particular condition or syndrome they may have
- If the person has a Health Action Plan, Health Passport or communication passport and request a copy
- If the person has specific likes or dislikes, which may affect the appointment

### Appointment planning

- If possible consider the location of the appointment, and where the person is most likely to be relaxed and comfortable. For community visits try to choose a location which limits disruption to the person's routine. In a clinic setting choose a separate quiet room to reduce distractions; curtained cubicles are not ideal.
- Provide longer appointments so that you can take your time with the person and avoid rushing them. Alternatively, if you are aware that someone has a short attention span, it may be better to offer several short appointments.

- Some people with learning disabilities may be unable to read. Consider arranging appointments via telephone and back this up with a letter, using an accessible format.
- Where appropriate ask for a carer who knows the person well to attend with them.
- Check whether the person needs specialist equipment for the appointment (e.g. hoist).
- If your location is difficult to find offer to meet them at front door.

## Don't forget about consent!

**Many people with learning disabilities are able to give consent to treatment, however, some may not. Assume a person has capacity to give consent until an assessment indicates otherwise.**

### Remember

- A capacity assessment is not a blanket decision, it relates to a specified task/activity.
- A person can have capacity for one decision and not for another.
- Capacity can fluctuate – it may be necessary to review the decision or wait until capacity returns.

Where someone is unable to give informed consent, you will need to adhere to the Mental Capacity Act 2005 or the Adults with Incapacity (Scotland) Act 2000, depending on your location. You should also refer to your own organisational policies for further guidance.

## How to get the best outcome from your appointment

**Time** Start your appointment on time. Many people with a Learning Disability don't understand the concept of waiting and may find waiting areas stressful.

**Environment** Consider the environment. Minimise sensory stimulation, limit the likelihood of interruption and remove unnecessary equipment. Enclosed and noisy waiting rooms, and the smell of clinical environments may be unsettling for some people. A number of short pre-visits might help them relax.

### Communication

- Think about how you will speak to the person. Use short sentences, avoiding using abstract ideas and jargon. Using words the person is familiar with can help to get ideas across more effectively.
- Always talk directly to the person using their chosen name, even if they are unable to answer. Include the carer in the discussion to confirm information and advice. A good balance of involving both is needed.

**Flexibility** Be prepared to work from the person's perspective. A flexible and relaxed approach is essential. Encourage the person to look at and touch equipment, as appropriate.

**Assessment** Think about your assessment from a practical point of view. Plan the order of your assessment to minimise frequent positional changes.

### Functional and fun

- If you want to observe their movement ask the person to perform functional activities that make sense, or make the task fun and relevant to their interests. Be creative! Dance, music, iPads, puzzles are just a few examples that could be effective.
- Use imitation and role modelling; asking them to copy you or including their carer in demonstrations can be a good strategy.

**Making communication work** Use visual aids to explain what you want the person to do and what will happen. Pictures, photographs, symbols and video can be helpful. If you need to give them information to take home try to make it accessible, and refer to their communication passport if available.

**Difficult behaviour** Difficult behaviour is not part of having a learning disability. It can often be someone's way of communicating information. Use your assessment, carers advice and specialist tools, such as DisDAT, to rule out potential physical causes before assuming these are behavioural issues.

**Lack of success** If your appointment doesn't go to plan don't despair, just stop the session and schedule a follow up. Continuing with a negative experience may make future sessions more difficult. Discuss this with the carer and think about alternative approaches you could use next time.



CHARTERED  
SOCIETY  
OF  
PHYSIOTHERAPY

The professional, educational and trade union body for the United Kingdom's 54,000 chartered physiotherapists, physiotherapy students and support workers.

## Who can help?

Your local Community Learning Disability Team (CLDT) should have a specialist physiotherapist who provides specialist support to people with a learning disability who are unable to cope in mainstream physiotherapy services. They will be happy to discuss any concerns you may have and will be able to give you further advice on working with people with learning disabilities.

## Further advice and information

<http://acppld.csp.org.uk>

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

<http://mencap.org.uk>

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

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

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

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

[www.downs-syndrome.org.uk](http://www.downs-syndrome.org.uk)

[www.knowledge.scot.nhs.uk/learningdisabilities](http://www.knowledge.scot.nhs.uk/learningdisabilities)

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

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

This leaflet was written by  
the ACPPLD - April 2016.



ASSOCIATION  
OF CHARTERED  
PHYSIOTHERAPISTS  
FOR PEOPLE  
WITH LEARNING  
DISABILITIES