

Working with adults, children and young people with additional needs:

An Introduction to Specific Learning Difficulties

We hope that you will find this 'introduction' leaflet helpful. It is not intended to replace conversations that you will need to have with children, young people, their families, and the professionals who know them. Those conversations are essential to understand the uniqueness of each family member you work with to ensure that you can engage with them in the most meaningful and supportive way. Links to relevant charities, information services and research are embedded at the end of this leaflet.

A person with a learning difficulty may be described as having specific problems processing certain forms of information. Specific Learning difficulties is an umbrella term used to cover a variety of difficulties, which can range in their severity. Unlike a learning disability, a learning difficulty does not affect intellectual ability, although some people with a specific learning difficulty will also have a learning disability.

There are many different types of learning difficulty, some of the more well-known are:

- **Dyslexia** – difficulty with words
- **Dysgraphia** – writing difficulties
- **Dyspraxia** – motor difficulties
- **Dyscalculia** - difficulty with mathematical calculations

A learning difficulty usually presents in childhood and is often caused due to difficulties during brain development, either before birth, during birth or in early childhood. Risk factors include:

- Mother becoming ill during pregnancy
- A lack of oxygen to the brain during birth
- Illness, such as meningitis
- Injury during early childhood

There is no definitive record of how many people in the UK have a learning difficulty. This is largely because most learning difficulties are 'hidden,' meaning that the condition is not immediately obvious to others, or even to the person themselves.



Planning for meetings, interviews and direct work

A person with a specific learning difficulty may need you to adjust how you would usually undertake direct work or an interview. Their specific learning difficulty may affect their written/spoken language and could cause difficulty with processing information, visual and auditory perceptual skills (dyslexia) or difficulty with written work for example the written work, it may be messy, illegible or have poor spelling (dysgraphia). The child, young person or adult may find it difficult to tell the time (dyscalculia). It is important that you establish what they need from you to make this an effective piece of work. Speaking with the child, young person or adult and their family members and the professionals who know them will guide your planning.



- ✓ Where/how would the person like to meet? Remote working can be effective and may be more appropriate for some children. It is important to ask.
- ✓ Would the person benefit from bringing someone to support them in the meeting? They might require support in physically getting to the meeting. The support person might make notes so that they can remember what was said in the interview or give prompts so that all their questions are considered. If the person doesn't have a supportive friend/family member, have they considered utilising an advocacy service?
- ✓ Avoid jargon and long words that may be hard to understand.
- ✓ Adapt your communication style – take your cue from the person and find out their preferred communication style.
- ✓ Adjust your computer settings - certain fonts make it easier for dyslexic people to read. They are weighted differently so the letters and numbers are easier to read.
- ✓ Adjusting the background colour of a screen can also reduce distractions

- ✓ Let them take the lead to set the pace - listen
- ✓ Give enough time for the direct work/interview – The child may prefer to dictate their wishes and feelings to you or

- to the computer. If a parent is reading a report at Court, have they got ample time/the support/technology they need?
- ✓ Don't be afraid to be creative

Introducing Yourself to Children & Families

The templates for the **introductory letters** are editable. These letters can be sent to a child, young person or adult, to introduce yourself and share details about the purpose of your interview/visit. Use of pictures, images and jargon free language is appropriate in these letters. Electronic documents can be 'read aloud' by the computer.

If a letter is not appropriate, think about how you can introduce yourself and the situation in advance of the interview. Would a **call or video call** be useful?

Sharing your photograph/a picture of the room you're going to be meeting in so the child, young person or adult is familiar with your face and the setting is appropriate, which may help manage any anxieties.

After the direct work/interview has finished it is important to know how your recommendations to the court and the outcome of any hearing will be shared with the child. Would they like you to write to them again or use other ways of communicating? Is this best communicated via solicitors, family members or professionals, and if so, why? 'Easy read' letters and judgements are becoming more widespread within the family court and you can advocate for these from the judges and magistrates. These outcome letters can form a valuable part of a child's life story work. Even if the child cannot understand the letter at their current age or developmental stage it is something they may be able to understand as they get older.



The key is to work collaboratively with the person.

'With' not 'to'



- If a parent hasn't had sight of a safeguarding letter/report at a court hearing, could they use the 'read aloud' function on our laptops to access the information.
- Consider sending specific questions **in advance** of the meeting. so that the child, young person, or adult can spend time considering the questions/preparing answers before the meeting.

Safeguarding

Children, young people and adults with additional needs are at greater risk of abuse due to communication barriers, the signs of abuse being misunderstood or minimised, increased isolation and greater dependence on others for their care, a lack of education to help them to stay safe, and inadequate support. It is important to work proactively to protect vulnerable children and adults, be professionally curious and respectfully challenge others if we have concerns.

How can you be sure you're making the right adjustments?

The short answer is you can't. However, if you're flexible and willing to try different approaches, you're far more likely to succeed.



Using Cafcass Direct Work Practice Aides

Cafcass direct work practice aides are designed to be used with all children, young people and adults. Here are some tips and ideas to help you use them:

- Limit the number of 'pages' or screens you are using from the practice aides. This allows for clear questioning with visual support. Don't try to complete the entire practice aide unless this is something the child or young person wants to do and can manage.
- Share the sections of the practice aide you intend to use with the adults who care for the child or young person in advance of the session. This could include educators or support staff. They may be able to offer guidance to you about how best to engage with the child or young person.

- Include pictures or images in letters to the judge. These may convey the message the child or young person wants to communicate effectively and will allow the court to hear their voice.
- The 'Dictate' software can be used to allow the child to interact directly and see their own words on the page.
- Don't feel you need to do all the direct work yourself. Adults that the child or young person are familiar with may be key to helping you understand how best to communicate. Working alongside educators, carers and support staff may provide opportunities to amplify a child's voice in a way that you could not do alone.
- [Cafcass resources for professionals](#)

Remember, connection before content.

The importance of planning and relationship building cannot be underestimated.

Links

[Microsoft Word Tip How To Have Word Read Your Text Aloud - YouTube](#)

[How to Change Your Screen Colour - YouTube](#)

[What are Specific Learning Difficulties? - The Dyslexia Association - The Dyslexia Association](#)260186