

Learning disability (LD) - Support card

No two people with a learning disability are the same. Get to know the person to understand their motivations, how the impairment affects them, and what support they might need.

What is a learning disability?

A learning disability is a reduced intellectual ability and difficulty with everyday activities – for example household tasks, socialising or managing money – which affects someone for their whole life.

Football pathways

Learning disability (LD) players can (and do) play mainstream, pan-disability, and LD-specific football. Learning disability is usually the most represented impairment group within pan-disability football.

General characteristics

- A learning disability is not an illness or disease that can be cured, it lasts all your life, and can be mild, severe or profound. It affects a person's communicating, understanding and learning.
- The level of support someone needs depends on individual factors, including the severity of their learning disability. With the right support, most people with a learning disability can lead independent lives.
- It is often difficult to know if someone has a learning disability, you may not be able to tell just by looking.
- Research suggests around half of autistic people also have a learning disability.
- Within sport there are three basic things that decide if someone has a learning disability:
 - The person finds it harder to cope independently with everyday life. This might be things like how they communicate or care for themselves.
 - The person has a lower-than-average score on IQ tests. Generally, it has to be 75 or below to be called a learning disability.
 - Diagnosis must confirm the impairment was present before the age of 18.
- Be aware that the motor skills and physical fitness of some individuals may be poor due to a lack of opportunities to participate in sporting activities or even regular day-to-day exercise.
- Some people with a learning disability may use a signing system to support speech. The individuals are not necessarily deaf or have no speech but may not be unable to communicate effectively by oral methods alone.
- Accidents may occur due to a lack of awareness or perception of imminent dangers, or by an inability to respond appropriately.
- Some people with a learning disability may be more likely to have epilepsy than their non-disabled peers. It's important to establish how they manage their seizures and what procedures you should follow.

Coaching considerations

- Be patient and provide a predictable, consistent, and organised coaching environment.
- Set ground rules and make sure players understand them. Consider providing them in picture or easy read format. Be consistent in how you manage behaviour.
- Try to make your communication clear and concise by speaking slowly and using simple sentences, avoid complex words and sport jargon.
- Allow time for instructions and information to be processed and try to accompany verbal instructions with demonstrations and where necessary, visual aids such as whiteboards or flashcards.
- Avoid practices that rely heavily on numeracy and literacy skills.
- Focus players' attention before you speak, a good way to do this could be to say their name first when speaking to them.
- Don't assume understanding – check by getting players to repeat key points.
- Refer to players according to chronological age, don't patronize.
- Break down complex skills into simple steps but ensure you link them together.
- Praise all achievements as even those that appear small can be significant for the individual.
- Use a variety of behavioural and emotional regulation support resources such as flash cards, structure boards, and first and then prompts to provide a clear structure and to prepare players for when a change in activity is about to happen.
- Provide a safe place and/or person the participant can go to when a situation becomes too much and they need to regulate their emotions.
- Make sure you take the time to listen to what your players are saying. Try not to guess what they are saying, give them time to communicate.
- Take regular breaks and frequently remind your players to drink or use sun barrier cream to avoid exhaustion, dehydration, and sun burn.



Don't forget the golden nugget – Make sure your environment is always a safe and welcoming place to be!

How do I use STEP to adapt my session to include players with learning disabilities?



Space – Change locations (within your practice space) when changing activities to help transition between activities.



Task – Avoid practices that rely heavily on numeracy and literary skills and break down any more complex skills into manageable steps.



Equipment – When using a whiteboard, try to ensure counters are the same colour as the bibs you are using and the direction you are indicating is the same for the players on the pitch.



Players – Do not single out individuals in view of the group to explain more difficult concepts. Try to include further coaching while other participants are otherwise engaged.

Step top tip:

Remember: STEP is a tool to help you coach, NOT a list of things you have to do. In order to use STEP effectively, it's essential you get to know your players so you can use the right modification at the right time to aid their development.

Additional resources

- England Football Website: Disability Section
- Disability Football Introduction Course
- Mencap Website
- Special Olympics Website
- UK Coaching: Coaching People With a Learning Disability
- Mencap Sport: Learning Disability and Sport workshop