

A guide to the eligibility criteria in learning disability sport

**A guide to help you understand the eligibility criteria in
learning disability sport in England**

Updated December 2008



A learning disability affects the way someone learns, communicates or does everyday things. Someone has a learning disability all through their life. It cannot be cured, but with the right support someone with a learning disability can achieve a lot and overcome their disability.

'Learning Disability' though is a very confusing term. In the UK, it is a very general term used to describe a range of different disabilities. It might describe Autism, Downs Syndrome, Asperger's Syndrome, ADHD, Fragile X Syndrome and other conditions. Often it is confused with 'learning difficulty'.

Someone with learning disability or learning difficulty might go to a special school or receive special education within a mainstream school. They may have a Statement of Education Need or similar.

Learning Disability and Learning Difficulty

Conditions such as autism, ADHD and others are specific learning difficulties that impact on specific areas of a persons life – for example Dyslexia might mean that someone mixes letters and words, but their impairment will not normally affect their performance in sport.

A learning disability is different and affects someone's whole life. It used to be called 'mental handicap'. Someone with a learning disability may also have specific learning difficulties, but someone with a learning difficulty does not necessarily have a learning disability.

Approximately 19% of the school-age population is classified as having a learning difficulty but only 2% has a learning disability. Someone may have a learning difficulty with reading, writing and doing number work but this may not be a learning disability because their general ability is much higher.

What are the causes of learning disability?

There are many different causes of learning disability. Often it is not possible to say why someone has a learning disability but most are caused by the way the brain develops – before, during or soon after birth, for example:

- things that happen to the central nervous system (the brain and the spinal cord)
- a mother having an accident or illness when she is pregnant
- the genes that a parent passes on or how the genes develop while the unborn baby develops (genes are chemicals in our bodies that contain information about us)
- when a baby does not get enough oxygen or is born too early
- an early childhood illnesses or physical accident

Learning Disability and Sport

Learning disability is often referred to as MLD (moderate learning disability) or SLD (severe learning disability). Often sports competitions are described as being for people with MLD or SLD. People with many different learning disabilities and difficulties are likely to be taking part.

As you get better in sport though, the definition of learning disability used in sport is very different from the one used in schools or education. It is based on the **World Health Organisation's** and **AAIDD's** definition of a general learning disability or 'mental handicap' - a term which is not used any more in the UK.

This is often referred to as the 'eligibility criteria' which says that:

- The person must have an IQ of 75 or below
- The person must have limited 'Adaptive Behaviour'. This means they might need help with everyday tasks, for example cooking or travelling by public transport
- The learning disability must have occurred before the age of 18

An IQ test is simply a measure of a person's level of intelligence compared with the rest of the population. The average IQ score for the population is 100. Someone with a general learning disability falls within the 'below average' range (IQ of 75 or below).

INAS, Paralympics and Special Olympic

People with a general learning disability have two competition routes they might follow or they may choose to do both. Mencap Sport supports athletes to take part in INAS-FID (the International Governing Body for Learning Disability Sport) competitions which is the pathway to the Paralympics.

Special Olympics provides year round competition and training in clubs across the country and support athletes to take part in the National Games and World Games, which take place every 4 years.

Mencap Sport and Special Olympics GB have the same eligibility criteria though we check them in different ways. A guide to the pathways in sport is available from Mencap Sport.

Why is the definition of learning disability in sport different ?

We have to make sure that disability sport is fair, and that people compete against other people who have a similar disability. We also have to show that someone could not compete on equal grounds in mainstream sport. In other words, we have to prove that the learning disability impacts on sporting performance.

This is a very grey area and research is ongoing, but there is little proof that many learning difficulties (such as dyslexia, ADHD, or behavioural problems) affect someone's sporting performance. Also, people with autism or Asperger's Syndrome often have average or above average IQ's, ie. well above the 75 threshold.

How do I know if I or someone I know qualifies?

In school sport, clubs, or local competitions there is usually no restriction. Anyone who attends an MLD or SLD school or has a Statement of Education (or school action plan) is able to take part.

In order to progress though, it is necessary for athletes to apply for a classification with Mencap Sport. This is a way of checking whether or not you meet the criteria.

As you get better still, it will be necessary to apply for an international classification. Mencap Sport has a guide to classification which explains more about this process.

For more information contact Mencap Sport at www.mencap.org.uk/sport or call 01924 234 912

For general information about learning disability, Mencap and its services or training packages, visit www.mencap.org.uk or call the learning disability helpline on 0808 808 1111