

GUIDE FOR JOURNALISTS: CREATING CONTENT WITH SOMEONE WITH A LEARNING DISABILITY



"Since appearing in the media more people know who I am. I'm more confident. I show people with a disability they can do things other people do." Sas, Mencap Myth Buster

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mencap



What is a learning disability?

A learning disability is a reduced intellectual ability which affects someone for their whole life.

Typically, people with a learning disability need more time to learn and process information. They may need extra support to develop skills, complete tasks and interact with others, or they may have more complex needs requiring round-the-clock care. The level of support needed is different for everyone and may change during a person's lifetime.

Learning disability is NOT a mental illness or a learning difficulty. Often, the term 'learning difficulty' is wrongly used in place of 'learning disability'. Having a learning difficulty (such as ADHD or dyslexia) may mean a person learns at a different pace or in a different way BUT – unlike a learning disability - it does not affect a person's intellect.

With the right support, most people with a learning disability can lead happy, healthy, independent lives. [At Mencap, it's our mission](#) to remove societal barriers and shatter misconceptions to make this more possible for more people.

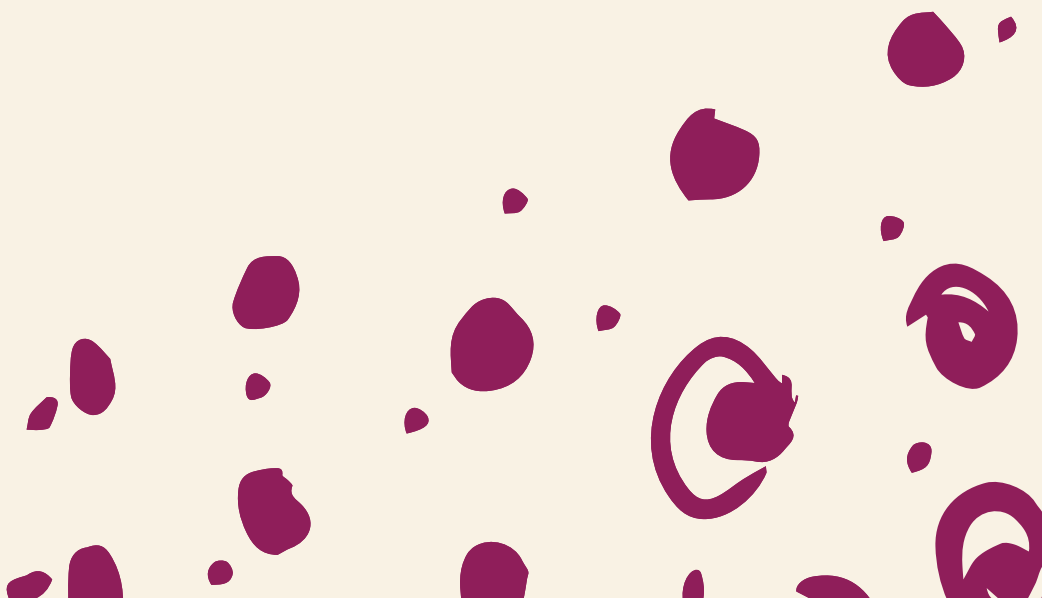
Media representation is key - people can't be what they don't see!

Hear from [people with lived experience](#) about what their learning disability means to them.



Key facts about learning disability

- 1.5 million people in the UK have a learning disability.
- 1,200 people with a learning disability die avoidably every year.
- People with a learning disability are 7 times more likely to feel lonely than the general population. With the right support in place, isolation does not need to be the norm. Having an active social life can help people with a learning disability build friendships, be active and feel happier.
- Some conditions such as Down syndrome, cerebral palsy and global development delay mean you are more likely to have a learning disability.





Key things we campaign on



- [Social Care Crisis](#) - As a social care provider, we can see first-hand that the social care system in the UK is broken. Increasing numbers of people with a learning disability are having their social care cut or reduced, and families are being forced to take on unpaid care. Without further investment, pressures will continue to grow.
- [Homes Not Hospitals](#) - Many people with a learning disability don't have access to the right community support, so are locked up against their will in inappropriate settings such as high security mental health units despite not having a mental health condition. We want to bring an end to this human rights scandal.
- [Cost of Living Crisis](#) - The increased cost of living can be tougher for people with a learning disability. Many are on low incomes, rely on disability benefits, and need support to be able to budget and navigate complex information from energy suppliers. Others may have additional physical or sensory needs which make lifestyle changes and new routines - such as changes to diet - harder to adapt to.
- [Healthcare](#) - People with a learning disability face substantial health inequality. We know 6 out of 10 people with a learning disability die before the age of 65. Women die 26 years younger and men die 22 years younger than the general population. 49% of deaths are avoidable, compared to just 22% of the general population. Early healthcare interventions, basic training and simple reasonable adjustments can help prevent families losing loved ones before their time.

Research and data sources

- 1.5 million people in the UK have a learning disability. (Source: calculated using learning disability prevalence rates from Public Health England (2016) and population data from the Office for National Statistics (2020))
- 1,200 people with a learning disability die avoidably every year. (Source: [Mencap](#))
- People with a learning disability are 7 times more likely to feel lonely than the general population. With the right support in place, isolation needn't be the norm. Having an active social life can help people with a learning disability build friendships, be active and feel happier. (Source: [Mencap](#))
- People with a learning disability face substantial health inequality. We know 6 out of 10 people with a learning disability die before the age of 65. Women die 26 years younger and men die 22 years younger than the general population. 49% of deaths are avoidable, compared to just 22% of the general population. Early healthcare interventions, basic training and simple reasonable adjustments, can help prevent families losing loved ones before their time. That's why Mencap are working closely with the NHS and local community partners to get things right from the start. (Sources: [LeDeR](#); [Oliver McGowan Mandatory Training on Learning Disability and Autism](#))

The do's and don'ts

When it comes to working with people with a learning disability, we know many people feel nervous about saying and doing the wrong thing. Our tips can help you avoid putting your foot in it!

 DON'T SAY	 DO SAY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • people with learning disabilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • people with a learning disability OR a person with a learning disability
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learning difficulty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learning disability
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PMLDs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • people with profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SLDs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • people with a severe learning disability (SLD)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sufferers OR victims of down syndrome/autism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a person with Down syndrome/autism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mentally ill or mental illness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • people with mental health problems
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the deaf or hearing impaired 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • people with hearing problems
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the blind or the visually impaired 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • partially-sighted people OR people with serious sight problems
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mute or dumb 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • people with a speech impairment OR non-verbal people with a learning disability
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learning disabled or mentally handicapped 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • people with a learning disability

A-Z on how to get the best content from someone with a learning disability

- **Ask open questions:** Many people have an automatic tendency to say yes or no. Where possible, ask questions that do not have a simple yes or no answer, to get the best content from your contributor.
- **Boundaries:** It's important to build a good rapport with your contributors, but ensure professional boundaries are in place, so that working relationships aren't mistaken for friendship. This is especially important when extended periods of time are spent together, or when dealing with a sensitive topic, as lines could become more easily blurred with someone with a learning disability.
- **Consent:** Check if there are any concerns over your contributor's ability to give consent before you start gathering any content. Many adults with a learning disability are able to consent for themselves, but others will need support from a support worker or guardian who needs to be involved when gaining consent and may need to approach things a little differently.
- **Don't be embarrassed:** If you don't understand what the person you're interviewing is saying or need clarification on anything to do with learning disability itself, don't be afraid to ask!
- **Environment:** If filming/interviewing in person, make sure the environment is comfortable, accessible, and free from distractions. Incorporate frequent breaks.
- **Focus on the person:** If the person you're interviewing is with a support worker or guardian, it's okay to lean on them for extra support and prompts, but also make sure you talk and listen to the person with a learning disability themselves and focus on them.
- **Give examples in your questions:** It may be easier for the person to understand what you need if you give them an example. E.g. 'How would you describe your job?' becomes 'I describe my job as x and y. How would you describe yours?' OR 'These are the sorts of tasks I do in my work. What sort of things do you get up to when you go to do your job? Could you tell me what you do in the morning? In the afternoon?'
- **Help:** Don't be afraid to ask for support. The Mencap media team has expert knowledge in this area and can provide advice or context and put you in touch with leading experts in this field.
- **Interviewing:** Be yourself. You don't have to adopt a different persona when you interview someone with a learning disability. Share questions in advance. Some people with a learning disability can take longer to consider what they want to say and how they want to say it. Extra time to prepare is especially important if you're interviewing someone who's non-verbal and may use a synthesiser to communicate.- they may prefer to input their responses into their device beforehand and may even need to reprogramme their software to fit the brief, which can take time and need assistance.
- **Jargon:** Avoid complex words and phrases wherever you can, opting for a more informal, plain English version (eg 'make sure' instead of 'ensure'). If you can't think of a simpler way to say something, you may need to explain what it means in a few different ways before you're understood.
- **Keep in mind:** The person you are working with doesn't necessarily understand how quickly the media works and that things can often change at the last minute. Extra consideration may be required managing people's expectations.

- **Let them talk:** Our spokespeople have a lot to say, but it might take people with a learning disability a bit longer than you're used to. Let people finish their thought, and check that they've said all they meant to say before you move on. Use your body language to show you are actively listening and engaged without interrupting (e.g. nodding, smiling, humming). Don't be afraid of long silences while people think about their answer.
- **Mythbusters:** Mencap is proud to work with a team of 18 amazing Myth Busters, who challenge stereotypes and bust myths about living with a learning disability, whether that's campaigning outside parliament or dancing on our television screens. Recruited based on their diversity and unique perspectives to share, you can meet them [here](#).
- **No one size fits all:** People with a learning disability are all individuals, have different levels of need and will require different kinds of support. Don't assume that one person you've worked with is the same as another.
- **One pager profile:** Try and gather as much information as you can about the contributor in advance, so you understand their unique needs ahead of meeting them in person. All Mencap spokespeople and Mythbusters have profiles available to let you know more about them and what support they need during interviews etc. Make sure you read these ahead of time. It's equally important for people to know more about you too. Our media team can help you produce a 1-page profile, to share with your contributor before meeting them.
- **Quotes:** It's important that people with a learning disability speak for themselves, in their own words. Be aware of this when you're editing their content.
- **Recording equipment:** If you're using any recording equipment, explain what it's for so that the person feels comfortable and isn't distracted during the interview.
- **Stereotypes:** Media reporting can have a huge influence on public attitudes towards learning disability. It's important not to fall into stereotypes, to abandon any assumptions you may have, and to let people speak for themselves. Remember that people with a learning disability are not always victims/vulnerable just like they're not always heroes or inspirational.
- **Time:** Ensure you allow extra time than you usually would. Expect gathering content to take longer than usual, and brief everyone else in the team on this so they know what to expect.
- **Understanding:** If you're not sure that the person you are interviewing has understood your question, try saying it in a different way or giving some examples of what you mean.
- **Variety is important:** Being underrepresented in the media can have a negative effect on how people feel and public attitudes. It's easy to assume featuring people with a mild learning disability is more straightforward than accommodating someone with more complex needs = but people with a more profound learning disability still have an important story to be told'. For example, people with profound and multiple learning disabilities have important stories to tell and are still rarely featured in the media. Also remember that there are fascinating contributors you can speak to from a wide range of diverse backgrounds including LGBTQI A+, BAME backgrounds who live in the UK with varied financial status. We can help access those stories and support to get the best from them.
- **Written correspondence:** Any written instructions or words should be in large clear fonts. We recommend using San serif and Tahoma, size 18-24. Always remember to use short sentences that can be easily read and use short words - 2 or 3 easy words are often better than one long one. Avoid italics and capitalising entire words.

- **X-rated questions:** Some of our spokespeople are happy discussing sex and relationships. Don't feel shy about asking them if it's in their profile. People with a learning disability can and do have happy, fulfilling romantic lives but it's important to remember that no one size fits all. Some contributors may have limited understanding, or other hidden vulnerabilities which affects what they should and should not be doing or saying in the public domain, so this line of questioning is not always appropriate. However, many spokespeople are capable of talking about subjects including finance, politics, and discrimination.
- **You:** Your role as a journalist is key to changing attitudes and addressing the lack of representation of people with a learning disability. Ensure the content you're gathering is empowering to that person and shows them in their own context. Consider people with relevant experience in stories that aren't just focused on disability. E.g. Myth Buster Sas loves talking to the media about her sexuality as a gay woman and would also make an expert football commentator. Myth Buster Michael, who runs his own baking business, is passionate about entrepreneurship and business.
- **Zero tolerance:** Using words such as "mentally handicapped" are old fashioned, and most people with a learning disability find this term offensive. It is never appropriate to use this kind of language.

Get in touch

If in doubt about the right language to use or how to approach gathering content with people with a learning disability, you can always [contact the Mencap media team for guidance](#) and support.

Mencap has a huge range of expert media spokespeople, including people with a learning disability, who can speak on a variety of subjects including employment, healthcare, finance, politics, sport and love, sex and relationships.

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