

Safeguarding Deaf and Disabled Children in Sport: Learning disability or intellectual impairments

What is a learning disability or intellectual impairment?

This refers to someone who has a reduced intellectual ability - an Intelligence Quotient (IQ) of less than 75 - and therefore will process and make sense of information at different speeds, and in different ways to other people who have an IQ of greater than 75. This might include everyday activities, for example household tasks, socialising or managing money. This affects them for their whole life. People with an intellectual impairment have more difficulty than their peers in learning and may need support to develop new skills, understand complex information, and interact with other people.

We should not make judgments or assumptions about any individual (including their abilities, interests or support needs) on the basis of them being described as having a learning or intellectual impairment. Every young person is an individual, and the impact and implications of their condition will be unique to them.

Supporting young people

The level of support someone needs depends on individual factors, including the severity of their intellectual impairment. For example, someone with a mild learning disability may only need support with things like getting a job. However, someone with a severe or [profound learning disability](#) may need full-time care and support with every aspect of their life – they may also have physical disabilities. (Information from the Mencap website)

Many young people with an intellectual impairment will cope well in a range of environments (including sport) with relatively little support, and many have gone on to compete successfully at high levels in their chosen sport. Others require more support in many aspects of their daily lives.

Someone with an intellectual impairment may also have a speech and language difficulty which might be linked to: the pace of their spoken word; the intonation they use; or that they might prefer to use other forms of communication (e.g. pictures, makaton, etc.); the language that they use; and the mannerisms they use when interacting with other people (e.g. degree of eye contact established, body language, etc.). It is important to understand that this is their pattern of communication, and to work with the individual recognising that, and adapting so as to best enable learning and interaction.

Potential implication

There are a number of possible reasons why an individual might have an intellectual impairment. Although a lot depends on the type and degree of the intellectual impairment, a child or young person may:

- Have a different pace of learning or understanding new or complicated information or instructions
- Need additional support to learn practical skills such as tying shoelaces and getting dressed
- Have social skills which may appear different to that which you are used to when communicating with people without intellectual impairment, such as in how they relate to other people or in holding a conversation
- Have a limited vocabulary and prefer an alternative to spoken/verbal communication
- Have a short attention span
- Experience low self-esteem as a result of bullying and the (often) negative reactions from other people¹

A young person with an intellectual impairment may also have other medical conditions or impairments (for example they may also be deaf) that need to be considered.

¹ Enable (2016) #IncludedintheMain?!, [Online] Available at: <http://www.enable.org.uk/includedinthemain/Documents/IncludED%20in%20the%2>



Safeguarding considerations

Many young people with an intellectual impairment can be overly trusting of or reliant on adults around them, or disarmingly frank and disinhibited in the way they express their feelings or opinions. This may often be very open and refreshing, although sometimes a lack of boundaries about personal space and appropriate behaviour (for example a tendency to stand too close to, hug or kiss someone they like) can leave the individual more vulnerable to exploitation or abuse. We know that children with intellectual impairments may be particularly vulnerable to abuse (of all kinds) and peer bullying.

With the right approach, support and encouragement children with an intellectual impairment are able to engage, enjoy and contribute to sport and all other activities

Tips for coaches:

- Meet with the young person and their carers to understand the impact of their intellectual impairment – including any associated medical conditions and medication the young person may be taking
- Clarify the type of support the young person needs in terms of their communication, social skills and sports participation – for example how best does the young person receive and understand instructions; do they respond well to a mentor (perhaps another member of the group); and to what extent will they participate in the sport or activity? For example, will they watch first and get used to the environment and people before joining in?
- With the young person and their parents' permission it may be helpful to speak to a teacher who has experience of supporting the individual in a group setting. Support groups or national organisations may also provide useful information and guidance for coaches.
- Consider arranging a 'practice' session with the young person and two or three other young people who you know will give support
- Do not make assumptions about what a person can or cannot do, or what they understand
- Reflecting the outcomes of the initial assessment of support required, ensure that your instructions are short, repeated and then demonstrated
- With regards to sport wear, if the young person has problems with eg shoe laces, either check out if this is something that he/she will be able to master or ask one of the other club members to do this for the person
- Be prepared to allow more time for instructions and demonstrations, or to deliver messages in smaller chunks, more frequently; repetition will be very useful to ensure learning and create stability within a series of sessions.

Further information:

Mencap www.mencap.org.uk/sport

English Federation of Disability Sport www.efds.co.uk

Ann Craft Trust www.anncrafttrust.org

Special Olympics <http://specialolympicsgb.org.uk/>

CPSU www.thecpsu.org.uk

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