

# SPECIFIC LEARNING DIFFICULTIES EMPLOYER INFORMATION PACK



## PACTS

Partners Collaborating in  
Training for Individuals with  
Specific Learning Disabilities



# INTRODUCTION

**Around 10% of the population have specific learning difficulties.**

**A potential employee may have difficulties, or an employee working with you now may be diagnosed with a specific learning difficulty.**

**Knowing how difficulties present and what to do can help you to maximise the potential of your workforce and work towards compliance under the Disability Discrimination Act in the UK and the Disability legislation emerging in Ireland.**

Specific learning difficulties is the umbrella term for disorders such as Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD), Dyspraxia, Dyslexia, Attention Deficit (Hyperactivity) Disorder and Asperger's Syndrome (APA,1994). Specific learning difficulties are three to four times more common amongst men than women. Individuals are generally of average or above average intelligence.

General awareness of the needs of individuals with learning disabilities has grown over the past few years. However, understanding and awareness of individuals with specific learning difficulties (SpLDs') remains patchy.

People who experience specific learning difficulties often don't have an obvious 'badge' of disability but may continually perform sub-optimally. They may require tailored approaches to learning; these are not always fully understood and the teaching approaches applied may not always be appropriate.

If their training and support needs are met, many can enjoy long-term success, and make significant contribution to the labour market.

There is now extensive evidence to show high overlap (also termed co-morbidity) with specific learning difficulties so that an individual with one area of difficulty may have other difficulties that will impact on their work or home life.

## WHAT ARE SPECIFIC LEARNING DIFFICULTIES?

Specific learning difficulties may include conditions such as:

- a) **DCD** - Developmental Co-ordination Disorder (sometimes known as **Dyspraxia**)  
a co-ordination difficulty
- b) **ADHD** (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) and **ADD** (Attention Deficit Disorder) –  
an attention and concentration difficulty
- c) **Dyslexia** - a specific reading and spelling difficulty
- d) **Asperger's Syndrome** (sometimes known as higher functioning autism) - a social and  
communication difficulty
- e) **Dyscalculia** - a specific mathematical difficulty
- f) **Dysgraphia** – a specific writing and recording difficulty

In addition there are other conditions such as Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Conduct Disorder (CD) and Tourette's Syndrome that overlap with these conditions.

Usually individuals have average or above average intelligence. With the appropriate support and understanding are able to fulfil their potential and contribute successfully to companies and organisations.

### A) WHAT IS DEVELOPMENTAL CO-ORDINATION DISORDER (ALSO KNOWN AS DYSPRAXIA)?

Developmental Coordination Disorder (sometimes known as Dyspraxia) is a label that has been used often as an umbrella term for children with co-ordination difficulties.

Individuals with DCD may have difficulties within the workplace with:

- Writing down information, especially at speed, with accuracy and neatly
- Filling in forms or completing assignments
- Planning out work
- Taking down notes and listening at the same time e.g. in meetings or lectures
- Undertaking tasks where good co-ordination is required - especially if it has to be done fast *and* accurately
- Using certain tools which require good co-ordination such as using a shredder, rulers, staplers, changing printer cartridges, using kitchen utensils etc
- Organisational and time management difficulties, e.g. keeping a diary or completing tasks to time. The individual may need longer than others to complete a task
- Difficulty in doing repetitive or rhythmical tasks at speed, such as working on a conveyor belt or feeding papers into a photocopier
- Difficulties with coordination may also affect confidence and self-esteem in their job and also it may affect their social confidence
- May have some associated difficulties with maths resulting in some difficulties with money management

## **B) WHAT IS ATTENTION DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER (ADHD) AND ATTENTION DEFICIT DISORDER (ADD)?**

The three core symptoms of ADHD are generally considered to be these:

- Hyperactivity – needing to move around, fidgety.
- Impulsivity – answering out of turn, making decisions and not always thinking about the consequences.
- Attention problems – difficulties staying on one task, switching from project to project, difficulties listening and doing.

For many adults with ADHD, as they get older the signs of hyperactivity diminish and they are left with the attention, concentration and organisational difficulties.

The main difficulties seen in adults with ADD are:

- Easily distracted
- Impulsive - acts first and thinks after of the consequences
- Feel restless and on the go at all times
- Disorganised
- Blurt out inappropriate remarks, interrupt others, do or say things that they later regret (cause of much embarrassment)
- Difficulty in being aware of tone and volume of voice
- Difficulty seeing a project through to completion
- Tapping feet or fingers or fidgety
- May tend to do things to excess e.g. driving fast, drinking excess alcohol

## **C) WHAT IS DYSLEXIA?**

Dyslexia is a reading disorder that is marked by difficulties with reading speed, accuracy and/or comprehension despite adequate intelligence and teaching. It usually presents around the age of 7 or 8 as the child's deficiencies become clear in the school setting. Often there are other associated symptoms such as poor spelling, writing, handwriting and occasionally mathematical difficulties.

The main difficulties for individuals with Dyslexia are:

- Difficulty with reading and spelling despite receiving reasonable educational input
- Losing the place or missing out lines when reading
- Confusing the names of things such as objects (for example, 'table' for 'chair')
- Difficulty telling left from right
- Difficulty map-reading or finding their way to a strange place confusing
- Needing to re-read pages or paragraphs they have just read to understand them
- Getting confused when given several instructions at once
- Making mistakes when taking down telephone messages
- Difficulty in organising thoughts on paper
- Difficulty learning multiplication tables
- Difficulty reading aloud
- Needing to redraft work several times

## D) WHAT IS ASPERGER'S SYNDROME?

Asperger's Syndrome (AS) results in the individual having severe difficulties in social interaction. They may also have a narrow range of interests. In addition, the individual may have difficulties being adaptable and flexible, especially in new or changing situations.

Main difficulties with individuals with AS are:

- Difficulty in accepting criticism or correction, and difficulty in offering correction or criticism without appearing harsh, pedantic or insensitive
- Difficulty in perceiving and applying unwritten social rules or protocols, such as how far away to stand when talking to someone
- 'Immature' manners – can behave inappropriately in a social situation and not have the 'repair skills'
- Failure to distinguish between private and public personal care habits, i.e. nose picking, teeth picking, ear canal cleaning, clothing arrangement
- Naïve trust in others and may also be shy
- Constant anxiety about performance and acceptance, despite recognition and commendation
- Bluntness and abruptness in emotional expression
- May present as 'over-honest'
- 'Flat affect' – may appear depressed
- Little apparent sense of humour or a seemingly bizarre sense of humour
- Difficulty with reciprocal displays of pleasantries and greetings – may not initiate a conversation or may abruptly end it
- Problems expressing empathy or comfort to/with others
- Difficulty with adopting a social mask to obscure real feelings, moods or reactions i.e. not showing extreme disappointment
- Rigid adherence to rules where flexibility is desirable
- Apparent absence of relaxation, recreational, or 'time out' activities
- Flash temper
- Excessive talking perhaps on a restrictive range of topics - unaware when to stop or of the impact on others
- Difficulty in forming friendships and intimate relationships

# HOW CAN YOU HELP AS AN EMPLOYER?

With the right support individuals with specific learning difficulties can make a valuable contribution to you as an employer.

## GENERAL ADAPTATIONS AND APPROACHES IN THE WORKPLACE

Job application forms and other written materials in Arial, Comic Sans Serif – font size 12 +

Opportunity to have materials printed onto buff paper as this can reduce eye strain

Applications to be completed online – no handwritten letter necessary

Options to complete forms over the phone

Give a list of appropriate abbreviations, acronyms and subject specific vocabulary relating to work setting e.g. for horticulture - hoe, divet, lawnmower etc.

Rules of workplace or training setting - consider both implicit and explicit rules and check for understanding- these should include clothing for different settings, times starting, breaks, etiquette for tea and coffee making, toilet breaks, how to address different colleagues

Consider workplace setting - such as music on or off, a workspace area away from general office traffic, visual distractions such as clutter

Give both verbal and written instructions

Create a photo bank of key equipment. Label where each item needs to be kept

Allocate a mentor to assist a new employee, where appropriate, until they are settled in. Also consider a mentor if the workplace changes in layout or in the type of work

Prioritise, sequence or list tasks that are required – use 'to-do' lists

Provide a summary of salient points at the end of a training session or meeting – allow meetings to be taped

Be patient and allow extra time for answering questions

Do not ask an individual to read information aloud without prior agreement

Allow alternative note taking such as flow charts, mind maps, charts, pictures and diagrams to clarify instead of just linear notes

Do not ask an individual to write on a white board without prior agreement

Do not ask an individual to present in front of peers without prior agreement

Agree reasonable breaks if required

Give out timetable of expected work in advance. Clearly mark deadlines

Make sure there is appropriate seating and lighting

Provide appropriate computer support - see later

Provide templates of letters and proformas in current usage

## SPECIFIC ADJUSTMENTS

Some individuals may find it harder to remember instructions when only told to them verbally. The following may help if this is the case:

AUDITORY ADJUSTMENTS
Write instructions down – the individual may want to keep a note book where requests can be written
Provide written documentation before meetings and discussion groups
Review key points at the end of a training session or meeting.
Have a list of key words or a glossary available. Use pictures or symbols where appropriate
Provide written instructions on how to use office equipment - Keep these handy by the piece of equipment
If a quiet work area is preferable; consider placing the individual's desk in a corner of the room or using screens.
Use ear plugs or personal stereos to cut out peripheral sound
Try to have a consistent workspace so the individual can organise their belongings and keep a structure to their desk.
Allow flexible working hours such as starting early or staying late to do focused work in a quiet office

Some individuals with specific *co-ordination difficulties* may find writing and recording difficult. The following may help if this is the case:

WRITING AND RECORDING ADJUSTMENTS
Use of a computer for recording
Have notes photocopied for training sessions.
Use of email for communication rather than written notes or verbal instructions
Use of voice to text software such as Dragon Dictate 8, Via Voice
Use of angle board to work on to help with posture and position
Avoid asking the individual to take notes in meetings
Computerised forms to fill in
Templates for regularly written letters or reports so the structure is already there
Use an electronic or stamp signature

Some individuals may have difficulties with *organisational skills and coordination*. The following may help if this is the case:

## ORGANISATIONAL AND COORDINATION ADJUSTMENTS

Try to set one task at a time to reduce the likelihood of confusion.

Help the individual identify priorities for the day/week on a regular basis.

Give the individual a timetable for the week's events and requirements in advance. Clearly mark any deadlines.

Set realistic time limits for the individual to complete a task. They may need an external reminder such as an alarm - this could be on a watch such as "Watchminder"- that vibrates at key times as a reminder to move onto the next task or using the calendar on a mobile phone.

Help the individual to organise their work into folders or colour code their work.

Help the individual to organise their computer files into relevant folders.

In order to learn a new task you may need to tell them, show them then ask them to do the task.

Encourage the individual to use 'to-do' lists to help prioritise their work

Break tasks down into chunks so the individual can plan how to start the task.

When giving instructions have them written down so the individual can refer back to them if needed.

An individual may be able to complete a more complicated coordination task if they are sitting down or they can lean against a high bench or table.

Tools with larger handles are often easier to manipulate and control. Tape may help to build up the handles on some tools.