

Learning difficulties

When learning takes longer across the board, and how tutoring can help

Moderate learning difficulties, global delay and learning disability · for parents and carers of primary aged children

Some children find **most areas of learning** harder and slower than others of their age, not just reading or maths. This is different from a **specific** learning difficulty such as dyslexia, which affects one area. Often no single cause is found, though it can be linked to conditions such as Down syndrome or early premature birth. These children **can and do keep learning** throughout childhood; they need more time, more repetition and teaching broken into smaller steps.

The words you may hear

Moderate learning difficulties (MLD)

A school term for children working well below their age across most subjects, who usually learn in mainstream school with support.

Global developmental delay

Used for children under five who are behind in several areas, such as speech, movement and play. Some catch up; others are later described as having a learning difficulty or disability.

Learning disability

A health term for a lifelong reduced ability to learn and understand, which also affects everyday living. It ranges from mild to profound.

How it can show at school

- Needing many more repetitions to learn and remember.
- Finding abstract ideas, such as place value or time, very hard.
- Difficulty understanding longer instructions and new vocabulary.
- Falling further behind as the work gets harder.
- Low confidence, and avoiding work to hide it.
- Tiring quickly and relying on an adult to get started.

The widening gap

In the early years the gap with classmates can be small. As lessons become faster and more abstract, it often grows, and many children start to see themselves as “thick”. Protecting confidence is as important as teaching new skills.

Measuring progress

Progress is best measured against your child’s own starting point, not age related expectations. Small steps are real progress.

Strengths worth noticing

Warmth, determination, practical skills, strong memories for routines and people, and real joy in achievement.

Often found alongside

Speech and language difficulties, autism, ADHD, dyspraxia, sensory needs and hearing or vision problems. Hearing and eyesight should always be checked.

A note on language

In schools, “learning difficulty” and “learning disability” are used differently from the NHS. Ask what a term means for your child.

“Every child learns, some just need a different path.”

Nicola, Moss Grove Tutoring

Why one to one makes a difference

A class moves on before many of these children are ready. One to one, Nicola can stay on a step for as long as it takes, check it has stuck, and only then move on.

What sessions look like

- **Small steps:** each skill broken into its smallest parts.
- **Overlearning:** short, frequent practice until a skill is automatic.
- **Concrete first:** counters, Numicon, real coins and objects before written methods.
- **Visual supports**, including Makaton signing where it helps.
- **Precision teaching:** short daily practice that tracks progress clearly.
- **Useful skills:** money, time and reading in everyday life.

Independence matters

Children who always have an adult beside them can learn to wait for help. Sessions build in short spells of working alone, with simple prompts such as picture checklists, so your child learns to get started and keep going.

A typical session

Warm up: quick practice of things already known.

One new step, taught with real objects and pictures.

Practice in several different ways, so it sticks.

Finish: a game and a look at what was achieved.

Working together

You know your child best. Before starting, Nicola will ask what has happened so far, what helps and what makes things worse. A short update follows each session, and with your permission she can link with your child's teacher or SENCo so that everyone is working to the same plan.

Being realistic

Tutoring will not close the gap with classmates and should not be sold to you as doing so. It can build secure skills, confidence and independence, at your child's own pace.

Small things that help at home

- Practise little and often, ideally at the same time each day.
- Use real life: counting at the shops, reading signs, cooking.
- Give one instruction at a time and show as well as tell.
- Repeat favourite books and games; repetition is how learning sticks.
- Celebrate every small step, and tell school about successes at home.

If you are looking for answers

Talk to the school SENCo and your GP. The school can involve an educational psychologist, and your GP can refer to a paediatrician if there may be an underlying cause. **Your child does not need a diagnosis to receive SEN support at school.**

Where to find out more

Mencap: mencap.org.uk

Contact: contact.org.uk

Down's Syndrome Association:
downs-syndrome.org.uk

SENDIASS: free, impartial advice on SEN support in school. Search "SENDIASS" with Gloucestershire or Herefordshire.

About Nicola

Nicola has worked in primary schools since 2003 and has been a Higher Level Teaching Assistant since 2008, specialising in special educational needs, including running nurture groups. She uses Makaton and PECS.