

Social inclusion



James Spencer from Worthing Leisure reports on the importance of social inclusion for both adults and children with learning disabilities. In the past people with learning disabilities potentially faced poor life opportunities, largely due to social exclusion. They struggled with acceptance from mainstream society, facing stigmatisation, prejudice and even fear.

So, what are 'learning disabilities'?

A learning disability affects the way a person learns new skills in any area of life, not just at school, and affects the way a person understands information and how they communicate. This means they can have difficulty understanding new or complex information and learning new skills. Around 1.5m people in the UK have a learning disability.

A learning disability is not the same as a learning difficulty or mental illness. Consultant paediatrician Dr Martin Ward Platt says: *"It can be very confusing, because the term 'learning difficulties' covers a whole range of learning disabilities. It is easily misunderstood."*

Prejudice and stigmatisation can arise because of a lack in education and facts about mental health and learning disabilities. But there are distinct differences. Some children with learning disabilities grow up to be quite independent, while others need help with everyday tasks; it depends on their varying abilities. Wider society and the media have

distorted most people's views and interpretations. News stories often portray people with mental health problems negatively and link violence and mental illness. This changes people's views and reinforces stigma. A large majority (69%) of people with learning disabilities have been put off applying for jobs for fear of unfair treatment. 50% felt unfairly treated by health care services. Worryingly, almost half (47%) had been abused or harassed in public, and some (14%) had been physically attacked. Thankfully, re-education, new ideas and innovation are changing perceptions.

The goals of 'Valuing People'

Services currently offered by community groups, schools and day care centres offer valuable support but we have to be careful that they do not add to the problem of social exclusion through segregation. 'Valuing People', a policy created by the UK Government, looks to

improve valued support services and aims to make life easier for people with learning disabilities. They have four core beliefs that all people with learning disabilities should:

- have the opportunity to lead independent lives
- be able to express and achieve their preferences
- have equal legal and civil rights
- be included in mainstream society.

...showing that people with learning disabilities or mental health problems are 'the same as you', with the same fundamental needs for everyday life.

The policies have inspired initiatives for social inclusion, such as 'Just Like You'. Their vision is to educate society, showing that people with learning disabilities or mental health problems are 'the same as you', with the same fundamental needs for everyday life.

A true life story - proof it's working

At Worthing Leisure Centre in Sussex this summer, an eight year old called Katie Rathbone attended an inclusive 'Sensory Art' kids activity group, where children of all abilities can design, create and play in a

completely safe, free space, with no 'rules'. Katie suffered learning and social difficulties, and was not used to socialising in 'mainstream' society. She seldom spoke or interacted and all she painted was blank sheets of paper, in black. After several sessions and careful engagement, her confidence slowly grew. Instead of black images, she painted houses and figures of people. Katie was painting and describing her home, her family, brothers and sisters to the teacher and fellow children in the group. Her progress improved as a result of interacting within an 'all-inclusive' environment. She learnt key skills in regards to interaction in everyday life.

Jennie Heirock, a Summer Fun Children's Programme Coordinator pointed out that: *"Disability does not mean 'no ability', as EVERYONE has a talent and something to offer society, whether creatively, practically, or otherwise. It's important to create sessions for mixed abilities; essential for children to integrate with others."*

Coaching and instructing a mixed sports group can be challenging and instructors/

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