

LEARNING DIFFICULTY vs LEARNING DISABILITY

FACT SHEET

When describing learning problems in Australia, two frameworks are most commonly used by the education, community and government sectors. These are the learning difficulties framework, and the learning disability framework. Below is a summary of the main features of these two frameworks, and the differences between them.

Learning <i>difficulty</i> framework	Learning <i>disability</i> framework
<p>Learning difficulty is a non-categorical definition, including all those who have difficulties learning one or more of the basic academic skills. The National Health & Medical Research Council estimates 10 - 16% of population have learning difficulties. Note: This framework includes those who would be classified as having a learning disability under the learning disability framework; such people are often referred to as having specific or severe learning difficulties.</p>	<p>Learning disability is a categorical definition based on diagnosis. The National Health and Medical Research Council estimates 2-4% of the population have learning disabilities.</p>
<p>Does not recognise the term 'learning disability' as distinct from the term 'learning difficulty'.</p>	<p>Makes a distinction between 'learning difficulties' and 'learning disabilities'. Learning difficulties readily respond to intensive educational intervention. Learning disabilities are lifelong and pervasive, and do not respond readily to intensive education intervention.</p>
<p>Does not focus on the primary cause of the learning difficulty. The focus is on the functional educational difficulties rather than on specific causes, except where the cause may influence the type of educational intervention applied.</p>	<p>Views learning disabilities as being of neurological origin. Views learning difficulties as resulting from specific causes, such as physical, educational, emotional, or environmental factors.</p>
<p>Learning difficulties are viewed as responsive to intensive educational intervention.</p>	<p>Learning disabilities are viewed as lifelong conditions which are highly resistant to educational interventions. Even with intensive, proven educational interventions, skills do not improve quickly or significantly.</p>
<p>Effective educational intervention will improve basic academic skills such as reading and writing, and will result in an improvement in the individual's academic achievement levels.</p>	<p>Intensive educational intervention alone will assist individuals with learning difficulties, but will provide minimal results for individuals with learning disabilities. Academic adjustments and accommodations, and individualised learning strategies are necessary to enable individuals with learning disabilities to achieve at their ability level.</p>
<p>The term 'learning difficulty' is used by some services, support groups and peak bodies, as well as in most areas of primary and secondary education.</p>	<p>The term 'learning disability' is used by universities, TAFEs, most educational and clinical psychologists, speech pathologists and in some areas of school education</p>
<p>Learning difficulties are not recognised as disabilities under the Disability Discrimination Act and under state disability legislation. Learning difficulties arising from physical, emotional or environmental causes are not covered by the legislation because they are not assumed to be underlying disorders or malfunctions (Puplick, 1995).</p>	<p>Learning disabilities are legally recognised as disabilities. The rights of individuals with learning disabilities are covered by the federal Disability Discrimination Act and by state disability legislation.</p>