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## A ramp won't help

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Many people assume that the term learning disabled is synonymous with mental retardation. This is not true. Learning disabled (LD) instead, refers to people often of average or above-average intelligence who suffer from disorders in processing or understanding written or spoken language or mathematical symbols (Stage and Milne, 1996). These conditions affect between 3 percent and 15 percent of the population. Perhaps the best-known form of LD is dyslexia, or difficulty reading;

but dysgraphia, difficulty writing, and dyscalculia, difficulty with numeric or mathematical calculations, are also common. Since these disabilities are by their nature idiosyncratic and invisible, services for people with LD are often overlooked in a library's overall program planning. This situation has also been made worse by the popular perception of LD as a childhood disorder that primarily affects school performance. There is now

a growing understanding that children with LD grow up to be adults with LD; adults who often require special skills and additional services to reach their full potential.

Stage and Milne's exploratory study suggests that students with LD may use the library more frequently and for longer periods than do their non-disabled peers. Similarly, MacInnis (1996) found almost three-quarters of the university students with LD interviewed had used a public library within the last year.

Adults who are not attending school may also have powerful reasons to use the library. Clausen (1997) suggests that the diminishment of jobs in the manufacturing sector, and the need for increased proficiency with computers and related technology, is requiring many adults to acquire new vocational skills. Adults with LD may be disproportionately affected by these changes, having selected such jobs to avoid extensive reading and writing.

The first step to providing improved services for people with LD is learning the nature of the challenge. Library staff can use resources such as the American Library Association's *Roads to Learning* web site or the *Best Information on the Net Disability Resources* page to gain more insight into the nature of LD and other invisible disabilities. Making public displays about LD - perhaps for National Disabled Employment Awareness Month in October - may help not only to inform the general public, but to show that library personnel are aware of special needs and available to help. Keeping applications and information about services such as Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic and the regional Library

for the Blind and Physically Handicapped prominently displayed along with other types of library information may also promote awareness and openness.

People with LD have frequently been exposed to stigma and negative labels, and may be used to passing to avoid negative perceptions (Barga, 1996). Stressing confidentiality in library orientations, tours, and promotional materials, along with showing general knowledge and sensitivity regarding disabilities and their effects, will help build trusting relationships and make patrons more comfortable in expressing needed accommodations.

Librarians giving bibliographic instruction, formally or informally, should remember to use both visual and auditory presentations of material wherever possible. In more formal settings, such as class lectures, community presentations, or structured consultations, it is simple to ask registrants to indicate whether they need special accommodations (a front-row seat or the ability to tape-record a lecture are common examples of accommodations that are often helpful). User guides and bibliographies can be made available in alternate formats as well, perhaps audiocassette or, for the truly ambitious, in a multimedia computer format with streaming audio, if your library has staff with the expertise to create it. When you do use printed materials, try to use graphics and typefaces that provide a clean, simple, and elegant look. Libraries that provide computer workstations for Internet surfing may wish to add voice-output software to make them easier to use for patrons with reading problems.

When providing materials in response to a patron's request, try to think of alternate formats for the information. Is the same or similar material available on audiocassette, Web site, book and community resource file? Offer all the formats and see which best suits the patron. The growing popularity of books on cassette is undoubtedly a boon for the adult with LD as well as the long-haul commuter. Be careful though, you should be aware that books on tape, i.e., popular fiction and non-fiction, are often abridged in some way.


When planning continuing education programs, many topics that can be helpful to adults with LD will also be of high interest to the general population. Programs on job searching, career planning,

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*We don't have any  
of those here, do we?*

*—Response to a patron requesting  
information on learning disabilities  
at an academic library*

stress reduction, college selection, and Internet use are all likely to be popular programs that can help people with LD compensate for their weaknesses and build new skills in areas of strength. If your library already offers or hosts a literacy program, consider adding materials and approaches that are designed specifically for people with dyslexia. Gorman (1997) describes the logistics of such a program in an article in *American Libraries*.

If many of these ideas sound like extensions of services you already provide, you're quite right. Active listening to patrons, careful selection of materials, attention to confidentiality, and respect for individual differences have always been the hallmarks of good library service. Consistently adhered to, they will help provide a positive environment for patrons with learning disabilities as well. 

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### Online resources for information about learning disabilities (and other disabilities):

**Association on Higher Education and Disability**  
[www.ahead.org](http://www.ahead.org)

This organization describes itself as "an international, multicultural organization of professionals committed to full participation in higher education for persons with disabilities." They offer a guide to tutoring programs for people with LD.

**Best Information on the Net-Disability Resources**

[www.sau.edu/cwis/internet/wild/Disabled/disindex.htm](http://www.sau.edu/cwis/internet/wild/Disabled/disindex.htm)

This resource list, compiled by librarians at St. Ambrose University in Davenport, Iowa, is comprehensive and helpful for general information and guides to further research.

**Disability Research Monthly's Librarians' Connections**

[www.geocities.com/~drm/DRMLibs.html](http://www.geocities.com/~drm/DRMLibs.html)

The links on this semi-commercial site will be very helpful to anyone interested in assessing or establishing adaptive services.

**Dyslexia: the gift**

[www.dyslexia.com/](http://www.dyslexia.com/)

Although it's commercial, this site is important because it presents dyslexia as a positive condition rather than a handicap.

**HEATH Resource Center**

[www.acenet.edu/Programs/HEATH/home.html](http://www.acenet.edu/Programs/HEATH/home.html)

This is a government site devoted to information on higher education issues for students with disabilities of all types.

**Oregon State Library Talking Book and Braille Services**

[www.osl.state.or.us/tbabs/tbabs.html](http://www.osl.state.or.us/tbabs/tbabs.html)

Individuals with learning disabilities are often eligible for Talking Book services.

**Roads to Learning**

*The public libraries' learning disabilities initiative.*

[www.ala.org/roads/](http://www.ala.org/roads/)

This site, still under construction as this goes to press, promises to be helpful for public library staff.