

Identifying an intellectual and learning disability?

Tips for observing and asking the right questions

It can be difficult to know whether someone is presenting with an intellectual and learning disability. Intellectual disability can look different for each person so the indicators below are just a guide. Also some people do not identify with this label due to discrimination or stigma. This tip sheet aims to help you observe and gently ask the right questions.



The person might describe themselves as:

“ Being a slow learner”

“Being smart in other ways”

“Having a learning disability”



Things to look for

- Difficulty concentrating or going ‘off topic’
- Difficulty with memory – timelines, events, details
- Difficulty making decisions or deciding what is important – may defer to someone to make decisions for them
- Difficulty following instructions
- Difficulty understanding and answering questions – give answers that don’t match the questions
- Difficulty explaining things clearly – may not explain things in order
- Difficulty with abstract thinking, complex reasoning, planning and problem solving
- difficulty expressing and managing emotions
- Difficulty reading and responding to social cues – may not follow social norms
- Take more time to respond or come up with an answer

What to ask

- Who do you live with?
- Do you have a job?
- Do you get a Centrelink payment?
- Where did you go to school?
- Did you have any trouble with learning at school?
- Do people come and help you with things like appointments, transport or at home?
- Do any support services help you?
- Do you need help with reading, writing or maths?
- Is there anyone who helps you make decisions or helps you with money?

Things to listen for

- Lives with parents or in supported accommodation
- Lives alone but has support workers to help them
- Does not work or works for a disability enterprise
- Attends a work training program
- Receives the Disability Support Pension
- Went to a Special School or were supported by a Special Education Unit
- Has support workers
- Uses multiple support systems – e.g. NDIS
- Has difficulty with reading, writing, numbers, time, money and memory
- Has the Public Trustee or Public Guardian

Note: These are indicators only and may indicate other conditions causing cognitive impairment rather than intellectual disability. Other sources of information may help to identify the person's disability, support and communication needs where unclear.