

A Digital Champion's Guide: understanding some common problems that people with learning disabilities experience using technology

"A guy we support has an iPad so had access to Zoom. Although we did show him how to use Zoom, he struggled when he was on his own. Sometimes I could hear the frustration in his voice because I'd be ringing the house phone and he'd be like "I can't do it! I can't do it! One of the great options with Zoom is that you can actually call the iPad. So, you can add them as a contact, and it will ring them. So having things like that just open up his independence. It's trying to identify ways of getting round the problem without taking over."

Some people with learning disabilities find using technology difficult. Four common problems they experience are:

1. Reading text-based material online.
2. Remembering login passwords and codes.
3. Remembering long sequences of actions.
4. Dealing with unexpected technical issues.

An important part of your role as a Digital Champion is helping your learner develop strategies that can help your learner achieve what they want to do and build their confidence. In this guide we will look at some of these strategies and suggest some resources that can help you put them into practice.

Supporting your learner understanding text-based material online

"Because he has difficulty reading, he often needs help to get into things. He gets quite frustrated if he can't do something immediately. So, you have really got to talk him through things and say 'no, it's saying this and its saying that'. Because otherwise he'll guess at what it is saying, and it can cause him quite a lot of anxiety." Janet.

Many apps and websites are very text-based. Many people with learning disabilities are able to read short, simple text; but may struggle with longer more complex text.

Suggested strategies

1. *Accessibility:* Teach your learner how to use the accessibility features in the device or the app so that text can be read aloud.

2. *Prompts*: For the most common apps that your learner uses create an easy-read version of the bits of the text that they struggle with. Easy read involves combining pictures with short, simple sentences.
3. *Buddies*: Identify anyone your learner could ask for help if they needed it. Remember, you will not always be available, so it might be helpful to set up a 'circle of support'.

Useful resources

- **Mencap's video on creating easy read material:**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CiPk02sOipE>
- **AbilityNet's guides to making devices more accessible:**
<https://mcmw.abilitynet.org.uk/>

Supporting your learner to remember login passwords and codes

People with learning disabilities, like many of us, can find it difficult to remember login passwords and codes. You could support them to put strategies in place to help them with logging in.

Suggested strategies

1. *Saved passwords*: If your learner owns their own device and no-one else uses it teach them how to get their web browser to remember passwords.
2. *Password alternatives*: Investigate whether the device will allow fingerprint or face recognition instead of a password.
3. *Strong passwords*: Support your learner to create passwords that they are more likely to remember.

Useful resources

- **Lead Scotland guide to making and using strong passwords:**
<https://www.lead.org.uk/making-and-using-strong-passwords/>
- **Digital Unite's video: Making great passwords:** <https://vimeo.com/693871088>

Supporting your learner to remember long sequences of actions

For many online apps there are a number of steps that we have to take, in a particular sequence. Some people with learning disabilities can find it difficult to remember all the different steps in the right order. You could support them to develop strategies to help them remember the sequence of steps.

Suggested strategies

1. *Practice*: Show your learner the steps and then plan lots of opportunities for them to practice doing the steps themselves.
2. *Prompts*: Create a personalized step by guide for your learner, using pictures of their actual device, to help make the instructions more memorable. The Ace Anglia guide below is a good example of a step-by-step guide.
3. *Personalisation*: Explore the possibility of using shortcut buttons for the common tasks. One Android App that AbilityNet recommend for this is Action Blocks.

Useful Resources

- **Ace Anglia's Easy Read Guide to calling on a laptop or computer using Zoom:**
<https://www.aceanglia.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/howtovideocallusingzoom-2.pdf>
- **AbilityNet's Guide to Action Blocks :**
<https://abilitynet.org.uk/news-blogs/unblocking-power-android-google-action-blocks>

Supporting your learner to deal with unexpected technical issues

From time to time we all experience technical issues with our technology. Some people with learning disabilities can become quite anxious and stressed when something unexpected happens on their device or app. They can assume that it is their fault that the technology has not worked and in extreme cases this can lead to them refusing to use the technology in order to avoid failing again.

Suggested strategies

1. **Empathy**: If you have had similar experiences to your learner, it may be helpful to share them with your learner. You can use these opportunities to show that everyone has difficulties with technology.
2. **Practice**: Show your learner the steps they can take to solve the technical difficulty and then allow them to practice doing the steps themselves.
3. **Memory prompts**: Create a personalized guide to solving the technical difficulty for your learner, using pictures of their actual device.

Useful Resources

- **Ace Anglia's guide: Five things to try if you can't hear someone on Zoom:**
<https://www.aceanglia.com/resource/zoom-5-things-to-try-if-you-cant-hear-someone/>

Further Resources

- **A framework for thinking about the practice of supporting people with learning disabilities to use technology** (Pages 22-24 explain why good support is about knowing the typical difficulties that people with learning disabilities have in using technology)
<https://tinyurl.com/mmm98txe>
- **Supporting people with learning disabilities to use technology: A toolkit for supporters** (Pages 33-35 gives some more suggestions for how you can learn about the difficulties your learner has with technology) <https://tinyurl.com/38x8dh78>
- **ITV News, Stewart Chappel talks about why being online is important to him:**
<https://www.itv.com/news/tyne-tees/2021-03-17/pandemic-perspectives-how-online-is-a-lifeline>