

**A Resource Guide on Screening Adults at  
Risk for Learning Disabilities**

For Michigan Students

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Adult learners return to school in adult education and literacy for many reasons. They have different strengths and weaknesses. Many seem to be bright and eager to learn. Others go to considerable effort, but cannot read or understand what they read. Others cannot write legibly or spell and make little or no progress despite their effort.

There are many areas of weakness, deficits, and barriers that limit students' progress in school. Knowing why adult students struggle academically will help determine whether their problem relates to specific learning disabilities (LD) or possibly something entirely different. Having this information is important because support strategies and accommodations exist for students who are diagnosed with LD.

You are probably familiar with the general term, 'screening.' Screenings are performed for a variety of reasons. Do you remember taking a vision-screening test to check your vision and meet the requirements for a driver's license? If you failed the vision screening, you would have failed the driving test. To find out more about your vision problem and correct it, you would have needed testing by an eye doctor.

Another type of screening is an academic screening test. That screening contains a small sample of items from various subjects such as writing, reading, math, or spelling. This screening does not take much time to complete. The results do not focus on the learner's academic strengths and weaknesses in each skill area. It does give a rough estimate of the learner's overall skill levels.

The screening process begins the information gathering phase in determining whether the individual has a suspected learning disability. There can be specific characteristics observed about persons with LD. Those include mild to severe problems in the areas of reading, comprehension, vocabulary, focusing attention, spelling, composition writing, handwriting, taking notes, speaking, pronouncing

words, listening and responding, memory, math, reasoning, and solving problems.

The LD screening process can begin at any time during instruction when someone identifies the need. The teacher's direct observation of the student during instruction is probably the best source of information about whether there might be a learning disability. An LD screening instrument can be used to collect additional information about the learner.

Adult education and literacy programs should have clear policies about screening for learning disabilities. The policies should cover when to conduct screenings. There are several possibilities. One option would be to conduct screening during the intake process for every adult who enters the program. This way, the learners' do not have to give their written, informed consent. They would be asked the following questions during the registration process.

- ✦ Do you think that you have trouble learning? If so, describe the trouble you have had with learning.
- ✦ How do you think that your difficulty in learning has affected your life today?
- ✦ Have you ever had any special help / classes when you were in school?
- ✦ Have you ever been assigned to a special education class or service? If yes, please describe.
- ✦ Do you have any medical conditions, chronic illnesses, or a history of head trauma?
- ✦ Do you have any vision or hearing problems?
- ✦ Is there anyone in your family who had difficulty learning at any time during school?

The second option is to have the teacher or tutor work with learners first and observe their progress. Then, only those students who are not making the expected progress would be screened for the possibility of LD. To do that, questions

about a student's learning history would be asked on the following areas during an interview.

***Reading***

- Word recognition and word attack skills
- Structure and meaning
- Confusion with words (i.e. glass for grass)
- Visual and auditory comprehension

***Writing***

- Handwriting legibility
- Reversals or rotations of letters (i.e. 'p' & 'q', 'b' & 'd')
- Reversals of words ('bat' for 'tab')
- Spelling
- Written expression
- Grammar
- Sequencing information

***Math***

- Estimating costs like groceries bills
- Remembering basic math facts
- Budgeting or balancing a checkbook
- Understanding the concept of time; sticking to a schedule
- Doing mental math
- Finding different approaches to one problem

***Attention***

- Focus on only one thing or one object at a time
- Impulsivity
- Fidgety and/or restless
- Mentally fatigues quickly

***Social/Emotional***

- Expressing thoughts and feelings
- Making eye contact
- Relating to authority figures
- Making and retaining friends
- Interpreting body language

## ***Other***

- Vision or hearing impairment
- Health problems
- Physical/emotional issues
- Education history, school reports
- Developmental and medical history
- Previous standardized tests
- Family history, primary language of the home
- Psychosocial history
- Employment history
- Co-existing disorders
- History of medication or drug use

To summarize, the screening process gathers relevant information through observation, interviews, self-reporting, a screening tool, and a review of school, medical, or employment records. With this information, the instructor can plan an individualized program for the learner that enhances strengths and minimizes weaknesses.

The information gathered through the screening process can also be a valuable introduction to the formal process of LD assessment. Although the screening process is effective in determining whether a student is at risk for LD and how to effectively teach him/her, it can't be used to officially diagnose the LD.

The results from screening are used by the teacher and learner to decide whether the learner should be referred for further diagnostic testing that could determine the presence of a learning disability. The results from screening only answer the question, "*Should this person be referred for further diagnostic testing to determine if he or she has a learning disability?*"

Diagnostic testing, on the other hand, must be conducted by a qualified professional, such as a psychologist, school psychologist, clinician, or educational diagnostician, who is licensed to administer such test batteries.

Only diagnostic testing, and not LD screening, can answer this question. The professional who administers the diagnostic testing prepares a written report, which indicates the nature of the learning disability and makes recommendations for further actions, including appropriate interventions for the learner to meet with success.

1. Does the individual show unexpected underachievement, but demonstrates evidence of at least average ability in some intellectual or social areas?
2. Does the individual display signs of poor vision or hearing? Are you observing the effects of auditory or visual processing deficits?
3. In terms of academic performance, is the individual having problems in the following areas: Reading (oral and silent), Expressive Language (writing, spelling, handwriting), Math?
4. Are you observing behaviors/psychological manifestations that can interfere with the learning process?

Now that you have learned about the possibility of LD and the process of screening, here are some questions for you to be aware of if you decide to go through this process.

- ✦ What time is needed to do the screening selected?
- ✦ Who will do the screening?
- ✦ At what location will the screening occur?
- ✦ Who needs to know what has been done and the results?
- ✦ What are the confidentiality policies and procedures?
- ✦ How do I get the accommodations that I need?

Lastly, a set of questions and answers follow which will help guide you through the screening process.

1. ***Question: I have heard the terms ‘screening’ and ‘diagnosis’ used synonymously. Are they the same?***

**Answer:** No, they are most definitely not the same. Screening results, by themselves, cannot determine the presence of learning disabilities. The results from screening are used by program staff and the learner to decide whether the learner should be referred for further testing with a diagnostic battery that would determine if there is a learning disability. Screening for learning disabilities answers the question, “Should this person be referred for further testing to determine if he/she has a learning disability?” Diagnostic testing, on the other hand, must be conducted by a qualified professional, such as a psychologist, clinician, or educational diagnostician, who is licensed to administer psycho-educational batteries. The diagnostic testing answers the question, “Does this person have a learning disability?”

2. ***Question: What are the most important points to consider before making the decision to administer an LD screening tool?***

Answer: Does the learner have difficulty in learning new material?

Does the learner exhibit some of the characteristics commonly thought to be those of a person with LD?

Have several interventions been attempted resulting in little or no progress within a reasonable period of time?

Can the staff of the program be trained to administer a screening device in a relatively short period of time?

Will the staff be trained to discuss the results and explain the pros and cons of a legal diagnosis of a learning disability?

3. ***Question: How much documentation is required before the screening process can begin?***

Answer: There is no requirement for documentation from the learner other than a signed consent for screening. However, to rule out the possibility of a physical problem that may be contributing to or causing the learning difficulties, it is recommended that a vision or hearing screening be provided. Vision and hearing components are often included in screening instruments.

4. ***Question: When should the screening for a learning disability take place?***

Answer: Screening may be administered at any time during the instructional cycle if the practitioner or the learner identifies the need. Teachers that are knowledgeable about characteristics that define LD are especially helpful in noticing deficits that undiagnosed students may display in class. Generally, if a learner is consistently struggling with learning the basics of reading, writing, math, communication, social and work skills and reports negative past learning experiences, then a screening tool should be administered to determine the need for further testing.

5. ***Question: How long should it take to administer an LD screening tool?***

Answer: This will vary depending on the selected screening device. Screenings can take anywhere from 10 to 90 minutes to administer and an additional 15 minutes to review results with the learner.

6. ***Question: Who should review the documentation after the LD screening session?***

Answer: Preferably, the individual administering the screening tool should review the results with the learner.

7. ***Question: What is the follow-up for the program provider?***

Answer: The program provider shall discuss the results of the LD screening process with the adult learner and be able to recommend resources for diagnostic testing should the outcome of the screening suggest the need for further testing. Such resources may include:

The Florida Division of Vocational Rehabilitation  
Community mental health agencies  
University-affiliated assessment centers and hospitals,  
counseling or study-skills centers, and  
Educational therapists, LD specialists, or psychologists in private practice

8. ***Question: Should the parent or caregiver be a part of the screening process?***

Answer: Learners 18 years of age and older are legally considered adults and do not require parents or caregivers to be a part of this process. Those learners who are 17 years of age and younger may need the consent of parents or caregivers in accordance with local policy.

9. ***Question: Who else should be included as part of the screening process?***

Answer: To protect student confidentiality, only those persons directly involved in the learner's educational attainment and social competence should be included in the screening process.

10. ***Question: What kinds of information will the screening provide for the student and the teacher working with the student?***

Answer: Although screening tools differ, they usually provide information on demographics, medical/physical conditions, family histories of learning problems, and learning problems encountered by the learner in elementary, middle and high school settings.

11. ***Question: What should a teacher do with information gathered after an LD screening tool has been administered?***

Answer: If the outcome of the screening suggests the need for further testing, then resources should be recommended for diagnostic testing. If the learner does not choose to proceed further, then the informal screening should be used as a source of information for identifying methods and materials that will help meet the learner's needs.

12. ***Question: What information will be helpful to include in the referral for diagnostic testing?***

Answer: Results from one of the recommended LD screenings or one identified by your program should be included along with results from a current standardized testing instrument (e.g., TABE), if available. Additional information provided by the referring agency may include classroom observations of the learner's difficulties that have persisted in spite of instructional best strategies.