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A GUIDE TO LITERACY SUPPORT THROUGH THE  
INDEPENDENT LIVING/EMPOWERMENT SKILLS  
DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM  
AND OTHER CORE PROGRAMS OF  
THE INDEPENDENT LIVING RESOURCE CENTRE

Kerry Duffy  
Canadian Association of Independent Living Centres  
Ottawa, 1996

**A Guide to Literacy Support Through the  
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## **Table of Contents**

**Introduction**

**Literacy and Independent Living Resource Centres**

**Low Literacy, Myth and Reality**

**Recognizing Low Literacy**

**Being Sensitive Towards Literacy Issues**

**Reasons you might hear for not Gaining Literacy Skills and How ILRCs Can Help**

**Motivations for Attending a Literacy Program**

**Literacy Options - what's available in your community?**

**Making sure consumers with low literacy know their entitlements.**

## Introduction

This document was developed to assist the Independent Living Resource Centres to provide literacy support to consumers through their core programs. We want to encourage the ILRCs to promote and support literacy through the core programs, and to show them how easily this can be done. As you will find out while reading this guide, there are a number of approaches you can take.

The Independent Living / Empowerment Skills Development Program was chosen as the focus of this guide for a number of reasons. Many of the issues that are handled through the IL/Empowerment Skills Development Program, are related to literacy or literacy acquisition. Reading, writing and numeracy are important advocacy skills. As well, the nature of the relationship that develops between consumers of the IL/Empowerment program and the staff of the program lends itself to the intimacy and trust needed to approach this subject.

I would like to thank the members of the literacy committee for all of the hours spent reading and revising. The members are:

Judy Martin, representing the PEI Independent Living Resource Centre;

Rose-Marie Robichaud, representing L'Association des personnes handicapées de la Péninsule acadienne;

Marlene McMann, representing the Independent Living Resource Centre, Thunder Bay;

Pat Seed, representing the Independent Living Resource Centre, Thunder Bay;

Mark Iantkow, representing the Independent Living Resource Centre of Calgary.

I have tried not to repeat information presented to you in CAILC's 1994 publication "A Community Handbook on Developing a Literacy and Disability Awareness Training Program", however since this guide was designed to stand alone, this could not be avoided completely. I hope that this guide helps you to provide literacy support to consumers through the core programs of your ILIRC.

Kerry Duffy

## Literacy and Independent Living Resource Centres

Literacy is an important issue for Independent Living Resource Centres. Low levels of literacy skills is a fact of life for many people with disabilities. It affects their lives and the communities they live in. For a variety of reasons, the literacy rate among people who have a disability is lower than among people in the general population. Recently Canada led an International Literacy and Economics survey among 7 industrialized countries. In this survey a definite relationship was made between earnings and literacy level. People who have lower literacy skills have lower paying jobs and are more often unemployed than people with higher literacy skills. Because of the results of the international survey and a Canada-wide literacy survey that took place in 1989, it is generally accepted that literacy affects employment opportunities and the standard of living.

The goal of the Independent Living Movement is to empower individuals with disabilities to participate fully in all aspects of the community. It is very difficult to participate in society without adequate literacy skills. Most information is presented in writing: signs, street names and addresses, products, newspapers, brochures, forms ...etc. People may not know their rights or what options are available if they don't have adequate literacy skills. This makes self advocacy very hard for someone who has low literacy skills.

Literacy Support is more than just informing a consumer of the different literacy programs in the community, although that is part of it. It means supporting people with low literacy in all activities and programs at the centre. Literacy support is a way of doing things that underlies everything we do at a centre. Considering literacy and literacy support in all aspects of the ILRC will not only help to make the centre more accessible to consumers who have low literacy skills, but it will make your Centre more welcoming to everyone.

## Low Literacy, Myth and Reality

Myth # 1 People who cannot read and write well are stupid or lazy.

Reality Many people who cannot read and write well are very intelligent, have great memories and well developed coping strategies. People lack literacy skills for many reasons.

Myth # 2 People who cannot read and write well come from troubled backgrounds.

Reality People who cannot read and write well come from all types of backgrounds. People with low literacy make up 30% of the Canadian population and they don't all come from a particular background. Low literacy is higher in some groups (people with disabilities, aboriginal Canadians) because of lack of opportunity or a lower standard of education.

Myth # 3 People who cannot read and write well are poor

Reality Unfortunately this is not really a myth. Of course all people who have low literacy are not poor but the likelihood of poverty is much greater for those with low literacy skills than for people who can read and write well.

Myth # 4 People who cannot read and write well have no skills that would benefit the community. People who cannot read and write well have no skills that would benefit the community.

Reality A person is not skillless because they lack one skill. In many cases this perception holds a person back more than a lack of skill. A person is not skillless because they lack one skill. In many cases this perception holds a person back more than a lack of skill.

Myth # 5 Most people will never meet a person with low literacy skills.

Reality Chances are, most people have already met a person who has trouble reading or writing - they just don't realize it. People do not advertise the fact that they cannot read and write; actually many try to cover it up. According to a 1990 census, 24% of Canadians are functionally illiterate (read and write at less than a grade 9 level). In theory one out of every four people you meet will not be able to read or write well.

Myth # 6 People who have low literacy skills don't have an education.

Reality Many people who have problems reading and writing attended high school and some even graduated. People with learning disabilities learn differently than other people and many have devised complicated coping strategies and have made it all the way through high school. They finish school with a lot of knowledge but without knowing how to read and/or write well.

These myths further stigmatize people with low literacy skills in our society. The inability to confront other people's prejudices can stop many people from trying to raise their level of literacy.

## Recognizing Low Literacy

Many people who have low literacy have put a lot of time and effort into hiding that fact from everyone else. Very few people with low literacy will easily tell an acquaintances that they have trouble reading and writing. Here is a list of 'signs' of low literacy. Please keep in mind that even if a does not necessarily mean that person exhibits some of these signs it they have low literacy skills.

- Always forgets reading glasses. Always has something wrong with arm or hand so he/she can't write.
- Puts written material away without looking at it, "to read later". Uses memory instead of taking notes.
- Always has a reason not to do tasks involving reading or writing.
- Has difficulty signing his/her name or dialling a phone
- Has difficulty understanding simple documents.
- Written instructions are followed incorrectly.
- Verbal instructions are asked to be repeated over and over again.
- May have a short attention span (related to learning disabilities as well).
- May be easily distracted (related to learning disabilities as well).

This is not a full list of signs that a person has trouble reading or writing, but it gives you some idea of how people try to hide this.

## Being Sensitive Towards Literacy Issues

Demonstrating sensitivity to literacy issues involves more than being considerate to an individual who has low literacy skills. It is an approach to information sharing when dealing with anyone. For example, always try to have alternatives to written information. When you are giving a workshop, keep written materials to a minimum. Also, instead of having someone answer a question in writing, ask them to answer verbally, or give them the choice.

When you suspect someone at your ILRC has low literacy skills it is important to enable them to gain these skills. However, approaching this subject requires tact. Many people who cannot read or write well have low self esteem. Never confront a person with your suspicions. Don't challenge them by giving them something to read or write. If you make them uncomfortable they may leave and never come back. Try to be straight forward in approaching them, don't beat around the bush. Above all you

have to be approachable. You may consider slipping into a conversation, some trouble you have with spelling or reading long words. Don't make anything up! Only use this method if you really do have problems in this area. However you plan to approach this, it is important to let them know that they are not alone. Many people have trouble reading and writing.

Some people may become defensive when you talk about reading or writing with them. Most of us will agree that people do not like to be thought of as knowing less than other people. If you get this reaction it is important that you let the person know they are not alone and that having low literacy skills does not mean that they don't have the ability to increase their skills. There are some people who will deny that they have any problem reading or writing. Even if you know this is not true, do not challenge them on this! Instead, remain accessible to the person should s/he want to talk about it later. Developing trust is an important element for all users of the ILRC but for some people this may take longer.

Many people who have low literacy skills and use the centre may not be asking for help finding a literacy program but it is important to open up opportunities as part of their overall empowerment skills development process. Low literacy skills have such a negative impact on the lives of people with disabilities and the rate of low literacy among people with disabilities is so high that we should be doing all we can to help people gain literacy skills.

The I.L. principle of consumer choice is very relevant in dealing with literacy. Some people don't want to change. They are perfectly happy with the skills they possess and don't want to learn anything more. For some people the time is not right and maybe later they will be willing to work on gaining literacy skills. If someone really doesn't want to improve their literacy skills then perhaps there is something else the Centre can offer. Don't push them and don't treat them any differently than you would if they had taken this opportunity.

## **Reasons you might hear for not Gaining Literacy Skills and How ILRCs Can Help**

- "I don't know where the program is."

The ILIRC's Information and referral program should have information on all literacy programs in the community. Let consumers who have low literacy skills know about these programs. The ILIRC's Information and referral program should have information on all literacy programs in the community. Let consumers who have low literacy skills know about these programs.

- "I will be alone"

This, of course, is not true, but getting someone to believe this can be difficult. Feeling alone is very scary at times. One option is to bring up the topic of literacy at a peer support meeting. Others may open up and tell how they have trouble reading and/or writing or how they had trouble before attending a literacy program. Another option is to encourage them to visit a literacy program and to learn more about it.

- "I don't have the time."

This may be true in some cases but it is usually an excuse and there is some deeper reason that they don't feel comfortable sharing. Let them know the benefits of being able to read and write better and maybe they will make time. Many literacy programs offer classes or tutoring in the evenings or on weekends to accommodate people who are busy during the work day. There may be a program in your community that has classes at times that are suitable to the consumer's schedule.

- "I am too old."

No one is too old to learn, but sometimes we forget this. If it takes him/her five years s/he will

be five years older whether they learn to read and write better or not. Encourage them with the things they will be able to do with their new skills.

- "I don't think I can learn."

Everyone is afraid to be proven stupid so don't dismiss this fear lightly. In a peer support setting let the individual hear success stories. Let the individual know that the reason s/he are not very good at reading and writing is probably not because s/he can't learn but because they have not been taught in a way s/he can learn. The consumer should be very careful when examining and choosing a literacy program to make sure that it meets his/her needs.

- "I hated school."

Introduce them to people who have gone through a literacy program and can tell them what it is like (it is usually nothing like school). Encourage them to visit a literacy program to find out for themselves.

- "I don't see how it will help me."

Tell them some benefits and how they relate to other LL. goals they might have. Have other consumers who have gone through literacy programs tell them how they benefited. If they still don't see the benefits maybe they are not ready to commit to taking a literacy course - but keep encouraging them!

- "I am embarrassed."

Many people don't want others to know that they have literacy needs. They go to great lengths to hide this. If they are given the option of one-on-one tutor type lessons, perhaps they may feel more comfortable.

- "I can't afford it."

Your Information and Referral files should have information on subsidies and financial aid for people taking programs. As well, some programs are free.

- "I have childcare needs."

Your Information and Referral files should have information about child-care services in the community. Many times there is not adequate daycare and the waiting list can be very long. Find out if there is any chance of child care help from the consumer's personal support system (family, friends). Support the individual while s/he advocates for better daycare services in the community.

- "My family is unsupportive."

It is disturbing to think that people would be against someone they care for gaining literacy skills. It does happen. ILRC staff may have to help explain the benefits of gaining literacy skills to friends and family of the consumer. If this doesn't work other skills training may be needed before the consumer takes the next step regardless of what others want.

- "There are no accessible programs."

To deal with this the consumer may need to develop more individual advocacy skills in order to make this need known to the community and to advocate for the service. Until an accessible literacy program is developed in the community the ILRC may want to consider offering a literacy program at the Centre through their Research and Demonstration core program. In many communities there are one-on-one literacy programs with tutors who come to the learner's house. If this is an environment that the individual can learn in, it could be a

solution.

- "There is no accessible transportation."

Many unique solutions can be created when this obstacle exists including one-on-one tutoring in the home or at a location that the consumer can get to.

- "There is no attendant care."

Although it is not always possible, sometimes there are solutions within the literacy program or within the consumers support network of friends and family. Temporary solutions can be found and the ILRC and the consumer can work hard to create them. Perhaps some advocacy interventions can occur to sensitize the community to make changes.

## **Motivations for Attending a Literacy Program**

- To get a better job.
- To reach a personal goal.
- In order to become more involved in the community.
- To be able to read to others (eg. children, grand -children).
- To gain more control in one's life.

## **Literacy Options - what's available in your community?**

In order for the Centre to enable consumers to gain literacy skills, it is important to know what the options are. Looking for literacy programs in your community may seem quite straight forward and in some cases it is. However, there are some specialized learning programs that may not appear under the literacy heading in guides and books.

To find the literacy programs in your community, the first thing to do is to look under **Learn** in the yellow pages. You will find a phone number there through which you will be able to access all of the community's mainstream literacy programs. Now it is time to do some research and gather information about these programs. Normally, a literacy program will give out written information on how the all community literacy programs. Some may improve over time. program works (class room style or one-to-one), when the next session will be starting, where the class takes place, how much it costs and who can attend. You can ask if the program is accessible, but this is something that should be checked out by a consumer or staff of the Centre. Some literacy programs may welcome the assistance from the ILRC to review their accessibility. When doing this it is important to remember that accommodation has varying degrees. What is a perfect accommodation for one consumer can be impossible for another. Don't discount any community literacy program, even if there are a lot of accessibility concerns. Keep updated records of all community literacy programs. Some may improve over time.

Try to make contact with as many community literacy organizations as possible. Let them know who you are. Arrange an information exchange interview to find out about each other. Find out how far they are willing to go to accommodate people with disabilities. Offer to give their program staff disability awareness training<sup>1</sup>. Try to build a positive relationship between the centre and the literacy program. In order to do this, It's important to be positive. Don't go to a literacy organization and say "Your program is not accessible to many people with disabilities. You should change a lot of things." Instead say "Your program is really great. Wouldn't it be wonderful if this was available to people with disabilities?" Some programs will not be able to make big changes, but they may be more willing to try to accommodate or learn about teaching people with disabilities.



There are a number of community programs that are not accessible by the same routes as mainstream literacy programs. These may be 'training' programs or 'upgrading' programs and may be geared towards individuals who fall into a particular category. This is where you will find programs geared toward people with specific disabilities. Because they are not mainstream programs, information about them may not be available through mainstream sources., It may be necessary to do a little digging. Many community groups set up literacy programs for their members. Phone different community organizations and ask them if they have a literacy program or if they know of any. If they do, get all the information you can on it and approach the literacy program the same way you approached the mainstream programs.

Sources often overlooked when looking at what literacy programs are available in the community are English as a Second Language (ESL) and French as a Second Language Courses. There are people with disabilities, especially youth, who are recent immigrants and cannot speak, read or write French nor English. This presents a double barrier - lack of accessibility and not having the proper grounding in English or French to attend mainstream literacy programs. The first step towards literacy for a person with a disability who does not speak English or French is to find an accessible English or French as a Second Language Course There may be a literacy program in your community geared towards former students of English or French as a Second Language students. If not, mainstream literacy programs should be adequate and are familiar with teaching literacy to people with limited vocabularies. Many literacy programs have broad mandates and are flexible in their teaching methods to accommodate all types of learners.

## **Making sure consumers with low literacy know their entitlements.**

Information makes the world go around. In our high-tech society most of our information is given in written form. People who have low literacy skills miss out on a lot of this information. People with low literacy have to rely on other people to relay information to them. A lot of very important information may not be getting to them. Some people don't know that they are entitled to particular services because of their disability. If they don't know about the services they will not be using them. This could impact on their quality of life and their ability to reach their independent living goals.

In order to make sure that people with low literacy know what their rights are and what benefits they are entitled to, try to keep paper information down to a minimum. Any time you give out information on a program or benefit explain it verbally. Explain things in your own words and do not use jargon.

As you get to know a person ask him/her if s/he is taking advantage of certain benefits that you are familiar with. Often there are a lot of programs and benefits in the community that a person can use once they know about them. Be careful not to overwhelm them with information.

Take things one step at a time, beginning with the issue which they as most important to live as independently as possible. Literacy training may not be on the top of this list, but it might come up later.

There is no formula for making sure that consumers needs are being met within the community. Ultimately the goal of the I.L. movement is working the process of the consumer identifying their individual needs as they are ready to. This has to be done on an individual basis and through all of the Independent Living core programs.

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<sup>1</sup> Complete training program is found in "A Community Handbook on Developing a Literacy and disability Awareness Training Program". (CAILC, 1994)