

General frequently asked questions

How many...? Why do...?

Who is...? Does it...?

What stops...? What are...?



NALA

National Adult Literacy Agency

Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

How many people have literacy difficulties in Ireland?

In 1997 the OECD developed an international survey which examined how well adults could cope with different types of reading and numeracy tasks which crop up regularly in work and in daily life.

The survey looked at how adults of working age manage common literacy activities— such as reading timetables, understanding the labels on medicine bottles, or calculating and estimating quantities.

This International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) concluded that one in four – that is, about half a million - Irish adults aged between 16-64 have problems with even the simplest literacy tasks, such as reading instructions on a bottle of aspirin.

Why do people have literacy difficulties?

There are many reasons why people may have literacy and numeracy difficulties.

These include:

- ▶ Having to leave school early to take care of a sick parent, or start work early to bring money into the home;
- ▶ Missing school through illness;
- ▶ Physical or psychological reasons such as poor hearing or vision, problems with speech or specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia that were not diagnosed.
- ▶ Being part of a large class and not having specific needs catered for;
- ▶ Poverty, poor quality housing, over crowding and lack of access to educational resources

- ▶ The teaching methods in school didn't suit the student's learning style;
- ▶ Not finding learning relevant to their needs; or
- ▶ Being in a job that did not require using literacy skills so getting out of practise. Or losing skills due to lack of practise, usually at work.

Also, many of the people with literacy difficulties did not benefit from free second level education as it was only introduced in 1967.

Who is most likely to have a literacy difficulty?

It is possible for people of all ages and from all backgrounds to have a literacy difficulty, but most typically include:

- ▶ Older people who had less or poor quality schooling;
- ▶ Early school leavers;
- ▶ People with a disability; or
- ▶ People with a learning difficulty.

The 500,000 people with literacy difficulties in Ireland include people who are not able to read at all or write their own name but also others who can cope with simple documents but find it hard to understand more complex forms and instructions. Some will have left school confident about their numeracy and reading skills but find that changes in their workplace and everyday life cause them to question their skills. The literacy skills demanded by society are changing all the time and if literacy skills are not used regularly people can easily get out of practise.

Does it predominately affect older people?

Not necessarily, while the IALS results for Ireland do suggest a direct link between age and literacy skills at the lowest levels other results from the survey show that literacy difficulties are widespread among all age groups in Ireland.

In addition, parents who have literacy difficulties may then find it harder to support their own children with their reading and writing. This may lead to their children falling behind and in turn having literacy difficulties or a negative experience of school. In Ireland up to 30% of primary school children from disadvantaged areas were found to have literacy difficulties.

Research shows that children who are encouraged to read and learn at home quickly develop better literacy skills.

What stops people from returning to learning?

Sometimes people who had a negative experience of school in the past associate returning to learning with that experience.

There is also stigma attached to having a literacy difficulty. Often people feel too embarrassed to return to learning and go to great extremes to hide their difficulties from their friends and family, because they think people will see them as stupid. However, this does not have to be the case. Adult education is a very different experience to school. Adult learning is all about addressing the needs of the learner, working at a pace that suits them and according to their needs and interests.

What are the benefits of returning to learning?

Whatever the reason, the benefits are always the same. Not only do people improve their old skills but they also gain the confidence to go on to learn new ones. Although it requires some hard work, it's a great experience that opens up a whole new world of opportunities in a friendly and relaxed environment. It's nothing like going back to school, because everyone learns at their own pace and there aren't any exams at the end.

Throughout Ireland, lots of people are returning to learning and brushing up on their reading, writing and maths skills. They are people who want to catch up on the skills they missed at school, parents who want to help children with their homework, workers who would like to go for promotion (but don't have the confidence to sit an exam) as well as those who would simply like to write a letter or send an email.

What options are there for people who wish to return to learning?

Who can they contact?

The important thing to remember is that it is never too late to return to learning and the benefits are great.

If you need to find out more just call the National Adult Literacy Agency support line 1800 20 20 65 and you will be put in contact with a literacy service closest to you. It's that simple. All you have to do is make the first call.

If you have access to the internet you can also check out further information on www.literacy.ie.

Information Documents available in this series

General

- ▶ What is NALA?
- ▶ History of NALA
- ▶ Strategic Plan overview
- ▶ Our corporate sponsors
- ▶ Frequently asked questions
- ▶ Current facts on literacy in Ireland

Promotional activity

- ▶ Our TV programmes
- ▶ Our campaign work
- ▶ Our websites

Areas of work

Information sheets are available on each of NALA's areas of work, explaining our policy position, what we are doing, the context and background of the area and detailing any relevant research

Join us . . .

- ▶ Membership benefits (includes membership form)
- ▶ Importance of students to our work
- ▶ How to become a tutor

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