



Parents with Learning Disabilities

Definition

A learning disability is a permanent life-long condition usually identified in childhood and which has been diagnosed by a qualified health professional or a multi-disciplinary team.

A person with a learning disability might have some difficulty:

- Understanding complicated information;
- Learning some skills;
- May have care and support needs.

A learning disability is different for everyone, and a full assessment is needed to identify what the person's strengths and difficulties are particularly in relation to parenting.

Please note a learning disability and learning difficulty are different.

A learning difficulty is a problem that the individual faces in learning such as ADHD, dyspraxia and dyscalculia and does not affect an individual's intellect.

For further information, see the Mencap website which explains further. Mencap website (<https://www.mencap.org.uk/learning-disability-explained/learning-difficulties>)

There is a far wider group of parents, who may not have a diagnosis and would not generally fit the eligibility criteria for support from a Learning Disability Adults Social Care team. However, the parent may be able to receive support from another Team within Adult Social Care or a Health provision such as a specialist Multi-disciplinary Autism Spectrum service or complex needs team within Adult Social Care. Support from other services can be invaluable and help everyone work more successfully with the parent(s). A multi-agency approach is therefore essential when supporting parents with learning disabilities as early identification and cognitive assessments are useful tools in any parenting assessment. It can provide more focused support to the parents' learning needs including around communication and cognition. This can also be useful in engaging and enabling the participation of the parents.

Parents with learning disabilities may face a wide range of barriers to bringing up their children successfully, and they may also recognise that they need support and help to enable them to learn to be the best parents possible.

The additional support needs of parents with learning disabilities should specifically look at them as parent/s and include an assessment of their ability to meet a child's developmental needs, as well as their own; personal care of the child; preparation of meals and drinks; attending to the child's health needs; parental involvement in indoor and outdoor play; support in education and help to identify potential risks to their child(ren).

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Where a parent has a learning disability, it is important not to make assumptions about their parental capacity. A full assessment should be completed with the support of other professionals such as psychologists (looking at cognition and learning), speech and language therapists (looking at communication needs).

Practitioners should not make the assumption that having a learning disability means that a person cannot learn new skills. Parents with learning disabilities can be 'good enough' parents when the right support is put in place in a timely way.

2. Issues

If services fail to coordinate effectively, parents with learning disabilities are at risk of falling through the gap between the provision of services for children and the provision of services for adults. As a result, some parents may miss out on support services that they need in order to prevent problems from arising. Early help and Family Support services should be considered at an early stage including at the prebirth stage in order to prevent future harm to the child and to promote the child's welfare.

The context in which people with learning disabilities have children is one that has been dominated by the perception of risk and the assumption that their parenting will not be good enough. However, parents with learning disabilities can be 'good enough' parents when appropriate support is put in place. Adults with learning disabilities may need support to develop the understanding, resources, skills and experience to meet the needs of their children. This will be particularly necessary if they are experiencing additional difficulties such as domestic violence and abuse, poor physical or mental health, having a disabled child, substance misuse, limited family networks which may lead to social isolation / discrimination, poor housing or poverty.

Neglect through acts of omission is a frequently stated concern; ultimately it is the quality of care experienced by the child which determines whether the parenting capacity can be regarded as 'good enough' and whether or not a referral should be made for an assessment by Children's Social Care.

Similarly, women with learning disabilities may be Adults at Risk and targets for men who wish to gain access to children for the purpose of sexually abusing them.

Children may end up taking increasing responsibility for caring for themselves and, at times, for their siblings, parents and other family members. A referral to the local Young Carers Support Group may be appropriate.

A learning disability is a lifelong condition, and parents may need long-term ongoing support, which will need to change to meet the developmental needs of a child as they grow. Assessments must therefore consider the implications for the child as they develop throughout childhood and services will need to re-evaluate the child's circumstances and clear plans should be in place on how this will be achieved.

2.1 What Helps in Assessing Parents with Learning Disabilities

Babies in Care Procedures: What Do We Know About Parents with Learning Disabilities or Difficulties looks at the 10 aspects which need to be addressed in any cognitive assessment.

Babies in Care Procedures: What Do We Know About Parents with Learning Disabilities or Difficulties (<https://www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/resource/babies-in-care-proceedings-what-do-we-know-about-parents-with-learning-disabilities-or-difficulties>)

The 10 aspects of parental learning disability or learning difficulty: 'cognitive functioning'

The following 10 aspects should be explored at the earliest opportunity and with relevance to the parenting task which should help with any assessment:

1. Understanding and comprehension, particularly understanding abstract concepts such as time or complex instructions;
2. Processing and speed of processing information, including oral and written communications;
3. Reading or writing (literacy);
4. Attention and concentration;
5. Retention of information (memory);
6. Reasoning (verbal or non-verbal);
7. Independent living skills (managing finances, problem solving or forward planning);
8. Adaptability, including to new situations or to develop new skills;
9. Social interactions;
10. Understanding other people's thought processes or needs.

3. Indicators of Concern

- Does the child take on roles and responsibilities within the home that are inappropriate for the child's age?
- Does the parent/carer neglect their own and their child's physical and emotional needs?

- Are good routines in place within the house such as meals times, bedtimes etc?
- How is safety managed for the child?
- Does the parent/carer's learning disability/cognition have implications for the child with school, attending health appointments etc.
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- Does the parent/carer's learning disability result in them rejecting or being emotionally unavailable to the child?
- Does the wider family understand and accept the learning disability of the parent/carer, and the impact of this on the parent/carer's ability to meet the child's needs?
- Is the wider family/friendship group able and willing to support the parent/carer so that the child's needs are met?
- Does culture, ethnicity, religion or any other factor relating to the family have implications on their understanding of the learning disability and the potential impact on the child?
- How the family functions, including conflict, potential family break up, domestic abuse issues etc.
- Is the parent/carer vulnerable to being exploited by other people e.g. financially, providing accommodation?
- Does the parent/carer have difficulty developing and sustaining relationships or have relationships that may present a risk to the child?
- Does the parent have a limited understanding of the child's needs and development including pregnancy, childbirth, and caring for an infant?
- Does the parent/carer have poor parenting experiences from their own parents as a child?
- Does the parent/carer know how to discipline the child appropriately?
- Does the parent/carer have difficulty accessing health care and other support for themselves or the child?
- In relation to pregnant women, should a pre-birth assessment be arranged? Where pre-birth involvement is a result of the mother's learning disabilities causing uncertainty as to her ability to meet the needs of the child once born, the Court of Appeal in D (A Child) [2021] EWCA Civ 787 stressed the importance of effective planning during the pregnancy for the baby's arrival, and of taking adequate steps to ensure that the mother understands what is happening and is able to present her case. Court of Appeal in D (A Child) [2021] EWCA Civ 787 (<https://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWCA/Civ/2021/787.html>)

4. Protection and Action to be Taken

Where a parent with learning disabilities appears not to be able to meet the needs of their child a referral should be made to Children's Social Care in line with the Report a concern about a child process. [Concern about a child | NELC](#)

Children's Social Care will undertake a multi-disciplinary assessment using the Assessment Framework triangle and include input from Adult Services and other relevant agencies in a timely way.

Specialist learning disability/cognition and other assessments are essential as a means to determine whether or not the parents require additional support to enable them to care for the child or whether the level of learning disability is such that it will impair the health or development of the child. Assessments involving families affected by parental learning disability should always include specialist input concerning the impact of a parent's learning disability and cognitive abilities.

All agencies must recognise that their primary concern is to ensure the promotion of the child's welfare, including their protection.

It is important that services understand who is to take the lead on assessments:

- Where there are no welfare concerns but adults need assistance with routine tasks of looking after children, Adult Learning Disability services should take the lead on assessment and care planning;
- Where parents need support in the medium to long term Adult Learning Disability and Children's Social Care will jointly co-ordinate assessment and care planning;
- Where intervention is required to prevent children suffering impairment to their health or development or significant harm, Children's Social Care will lead the assessment and planning with specialised input from Adult Learning Disability services.

It is important for support needs to be recognised at the earliest opportunity. If possible, identification of needs should start when a pregnancy is confirmed.

It is particularly important to avoid the situation where poor standards of parental care, which do not, however, meet the threshold of significant harm to a child, subsequently deteriorate because of a lack of support provided to the parent. It is vital to recognise low levels of need, which, if unaddressed, are likely to lead to difficulties for parents and undermine children's welfare. Family Group conferences or family network meetings have been used successfully to encourage the wider family support network to support the parents to feel less alone.

Where Section 47 enquiries conclude that there is no actual or likely significant harm it will be important that action is taken to prevent future problems arising.

5. Good Practice

The case of *A Local Authority v G (Parent with Learning Disability)* [2017] EWFC B94 highlighted the question of whether the parenting that can be offered is 'good enough' if support is provided. However, this obligation does not extend to support that is tantamount to substituted parenting. *A Local Authority v G (Parent with Learning Disability)* [2017] EWFC B94 (<https://www.familylawweek.co.uk/judgments/a-local-authority-v-g-parent-with-learning-disability-2017-ewfc-b94/>)

The case identified five key features of good practice in working with parents with learning disabilities:

- Accessible information and communication;
- Clear and co-ordinated referral and assessment procedures and processes, eligibility criteria and care pathways;
- Support designed to meet the needs of parents and children based on assessments of their needs and strengths;
- Long-term support where necessary;
- Access to independent advocacy particularly in relation to child protection cases. This should be at the earliest opportunity.

The case also highlighted the need for specialist:

Training- specialist training should be available on how to assess and support parents with a learning disability. The Good Practice Guidance on Working with Parents with a Learning Disability should be an essential part of the continuation training for social workers and managers. (See Further Information).

Accessible information and communication:

Communication- communicating with parents should always be in a way they understand.

This may require making reasonable adjustments including:

- Local authorities have to make reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act so need to think about how to meet the parent's needs such as taking more time to explain things; and any written information should be provided in an accessible form for the parent;
- Telling parents things more than once and checking their understanding of what has been said;
- Considering in advance how best to prepare for meetings, and discussing with parents what would be helpful for them and involving the advocate in these discussions;
- Visual aids to support with parenting such as pictures, short films;
- Specialist Support from a Speech and Language Therapist, Occupational Therapist, and /or Psychologist who can advise on the parent's needs and how best information

can be given. They can also advice on suitable learning strategies which may enhance the parent's ability to learn;

- Make sure the parents are not overwhelmed by the number of professionals involved in the Multi-Disciplinary Team and make sure they understand what roles each professional is taking on. For example having one point of contact so the parents liaise with them and information and appointments can be disseminated from this point of contact;
- Parents need to understand what any assessment is, what it is for, what it will involve, and what will happen afterwards. This information should be provided in an accessible format and may need to be repeated if there are any memory or cognitive issues.

The Family Court in XX, YY and Child H (Rev1) [2022] EWFC 10 stated that, in cases where a parent has a learning disability: Family Court in XX, YY and Child H (Rev1) [2022] EWFC 10 (<https://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWFC/H CJ/2022/10.html>)

- There should be timely referrals to adult social care for a parent with learning difficulties, without a very lengthy gap after a referral;
- Parents with learning difficulties involved with children's social care where a child is on a child protection plan should have their own advocate as a priority. A referral for that service should be made as soon as is practicable; and
- The support available to a parent with learning difficulties should be distilled into a simple document identifying what is available, how often it is available, timescales for its availability and who is responsible for its delivery. Such a document should be shared with children's social care (if involved) and discussed with a parent in the presence of their advocate.

5.1 Accessible information

Information about universal services made available to parents and prospective parents should be in formats suitable for people with learning disabilities. This may include:

- Easy Read versions of leaflets, avoiding the use of jargon;
- Audio and/or visual information on CD/DVD/MP3;
- Fully accessible websites;
- Creating opportunities to tell people with learning disabilities, face-to-face, about services for parents and parents-to-be;
- 'Word banks' of words that parents can read and understand, to be used in written communications with the parents.

6. Findings from Research

6.1 Good Practice (/chapter/parents-with-learning-disabilities#good-practice)

6.1 Good Practice

Good Practice Guidance on Working with Parents with a Learning Disability (Working Together with Parents Network) identifies the following:

Good Practice Guidance on Working with Parents with a Learning Disability (Working Together with Parents Network) (<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/sps/wtpn/resources/>)

- Self-directed learning can bring about long-term improvement in parenting skills;
- Group education combined with home-based intervention is more effective than either home-based intervention or a group education programme on its own;
- Parents with learning disabilities value both advocacy services and those which support self-advocacy;
- Good co-ordination and communication between children's and adult services is key to effective interventions;
- Preventative approaches are key to safeguarding and promoting children's welfare;
- Interventions should build on parents' strengths as well as addressing their vulnerabilities;
- Interventions should be based on performance rather than knowledge and should incorporate modelling, practice, feedback and praise;
- Tangible rewards may promote attendance at programmes, rapid acquisition of skills and short-term commitment;
- Other methods of engagement are needed long term;
- Intensive service engagement is more effective than intermittent service engagement;
- Programmes should be adapted to the actual environment in which the skills are needed in order to enable parents to generalise their learning;
- Teaching should be in the home if possible and if not, in as home-like an environment as possible;
- Factors in the family's environment which promote children's resilience should be identified and enhanced;
- The importance of family ties and the use of family group conferences and family network meetings (for most – though not all – parents and their children) should be recognised and no actions taken that damage such ties;
- Interventions should increase the family's experience of social inclusion rather than cause or contribute to their social exclusion.

6.2 Wider Support that Social Care Should Have in Place

- Screening should take place so early assessment work considers a parent/s' learning needs at the earliest point including pre-birth assessments (within a hospital or community setting) and at the latest during formal pre proceedings;
- Training for social workers and family support workers in identifying, communicating efficiently with and supporting parents with learning disabilities or difficulties;
- Incorporate and nurture learning disabilities expertise within child and family social work teams undertaking child in need and child protection work;
- Engaging with parents as soon as possible to end the delay of support;

Improve commissioning and availability of lay advocates to provide support for parents with disabilities and/or difficulties.

7. Further Information

Good Practice Guidance on Working with Parents with a Learning Disability (Working Together with Parents Network) Good Practice Guidance on Working with Parents with a Learning Disability (Working Together with Parents Network)

(<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/sps/wtpn/resources/>)

A Local Authority v G (Parent with Learning Disability) [2017] EWFC B94A Local Authority v G (Parent with Learning Disability) [2017] EWFC B94

(<http://www.bailii.org/cgi-bin/format.cgi?doc=/ew/cases/EWFC/OJ/2017/B94.html>)

Tool for Assessment of People with Learning Disabilities

(<https://www.parentassess.com/>)

Babies in Care Proceedings: What do we Know about Parents with Learning Disabilities or Difficulties? - Nuffield Family Justice Observatory

(<https://www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/resource/babies-in-care-proceedings-what-do-we-know-about-parents-with-learning-disabilities-or-difficulties>)