

CHILDREN OF PARENTS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

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1. DEFINITION

A learning disability is a permanent life-long condition, which is defined by the Department of Health as:

- A significantly reduced ability to understand new or complex information, to learn new skills (impaired intelligence).
- A reduced ability to cope independently (impaired social functioning), which started before adulthood, with a lasting effect on development.

However, many people who have a diagnosed learning disability prefer to use the term 'learning difficulty'. They feel that the term 'learning disability' implies that they cannot learn at all.

There is a far wider group of parents with learning difficulties, who do not have a diagnosis and would not generally fit the eligibility criteria for support services in their own right. These parents often recognise that they need practical support and help to enable them to learn to be the best parents possible.

There is no direct link between IQ and parenting ability above the IQ level of 60. Parents with learning difficulties face a wide range of barriers to bringing up their children successfully.

The needs of parents with learning disabilities include the impact on their abilities:

- To meet a child's needs as well as their own;
- To provide personal care of the child;
- To prepare meals and drinks;
- To attend to the child's health needs;
- In parental involvement in indoor and outdoor play; support in education;
- To recognise and respond appropriately for the child's stages of development;
- To manage behaviours appropriately and develop strategies to keep children safe;
- To provide for a child's social, sexual and emotional development at different stages of the child's life.

2. RISKS

The following list is not exhaustive but suggests some questions to assess or evaluate risks that a parent's learning disabilities may pose:

- Does the child take on roles and responsibilities within the home that are inappropriate?
- Does the parent/carer neglect their own and/or their child's physical and emotional needs?
- Does the learning disability result in chaotic structures within the home with regard to meal and bedtimes, etc.?

- Is there a lack of the recognition of risks, safety and protection needs for the child?
- Does the parent/carer misuse alcohol or other substances?
- Does the parent/carer's learning disability have implications for the child within school, attending health appointments, social networks etc.?
- Does the parent/carer's learning disability result in them rejecting or being emotionally unavailable to the child?
- Is the parent able to recognise and impose appropriate boundaries including restricting exposure to appropriate sexual behaviours, television viewing and social networking;
- Does the child witness acts of violence or is the child subject to violence?
- Does the wider family understand 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 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?
- Does the family functioning include conflict, potential family break up 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 – either sexually, physically or emotionally?
- Does the parent have a limited understanding of the child's needs and development including pregnancy, childbirth, caring for an infant, a school age child and an adolescent?
- Does the parent/carer have poor parenting experiences from their own parents as a child?
- 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?

3. INDICATORS

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 if the services fail to coordinate effectively. 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 need to be considered at an early stage in order to prevent future risks to the child and to promote the child's welfare.

The context in which people with learning disabilities have children is one that is influenced but should not be dominated by the perception of risk and the sometimes wrong assumption that parenting will not be good enough.

Adults with learning disabilities however sometimes may need support to develop the understanding, resources, skills and experience to meet the needs of their children. This will be particularly the case if they are experiencing additional difficulties such as Domestic Violence, poor physical or mental health, are parenting a disabled child, dealing with substance misuse, social isolation, poor housing or living in poverty.

Neglect through acts of omission rather than commission is frequently a feature of parents with learning difficulties. Ultimately, it is the quality of care experienced by the child that determines whether the parenting capacity can be regarded as sufficient and whether or not a referral needs to be made Early Help in to the MASH dependent on the level of assessed risk and need. Similarly, adults with learning disabilities may themselves be Adults at Risk and can sometimes be targets for individuals who wish to gain access to children for the purpose of sexually abusing them.

Children of learning disabled parents may often end up taking increasing responsibility for caring for themselves and, at times, caring for their siblings, their parents and other family members.

4. PROTECTION AND ACTION TO BE TAKEN

Where a parent with learning disabilities appears unable to meet her/his child's needs, a referral should be made to Children's social care in line with the Referrals Procedure, for an assessment of need and where necessary, intervention via supportive or protective services.

Children's social care, in consultation with Adult Services and other partner agencies must undertake a multidisciplinary assessment using the Assessment Framework triangle/**Thresholds of Need Guidance 2020**. Where appropriate, specialist learning disability and other assessments, should be conducted to determine whether or not the parents require support to care adequately or whether the level of learning disability is such that if the adult remains the primary carer, it will impair the health or development of the child. In circumstances where the parent is caring for a child with a disability, he or she is entitled to a carer's assessment in their own right, under the Care Act 2014.

Regardless of the parent's needs, all agencies must recognise that their primary concern is to ensure the promotion of the child's welfare, including their protection whilst recognising that a learning disabled parent:

- May also be a vulnerable adult as defined within Care Act 2014.
- May have needs for care and support (whether or not any agency is meeting any of those needs); and
- May be experiencing, or at risk of, abuse or neglect; and
- May as a result of those care and support needs be unable to protect themselves from either the risk of, or the experience of abuse or neglect.

If any professional believes that any adult is vulnerable as outlined above, they must make a referral to Adult social care in line with North East Lincolnshire Safeguarding Adult Board processes. Further details regarding referrals can be found at: **Focus independent Adult Social Work website**.

5. ISSUES

Parents with learning difficulties may need long-term support that will need to change and adapt as the developmental needs of a child changes as they grow.

Resources will need to be adapted to work with parents who may have literacy or communication difficulties. They may have other complex problems or conditions that require a range of professionals with particular expertise to be involved in their lives.

Where the disabled parent has family support networks, professionals should always endeavour to involve them and use family network meetings and family group conferences to maximise the capacity for independent parenting and keep statutory interventions to a minimum.

The safeguarding system can be daunting for parents with learning difficulties and consideration should therefore be given to supporting them throughout this process, including consideration being given to offering and providing an advocate. Wherever possible, all professionals that are aware of adults with learning difficulties becoming parents or carers, should be mindful of the potential difficulties and ensure support needs are identified early and risks are assessed and reviewed at appropriate stages so that planning is timely and appropriate to meet the needs of the child and prevent escalation.

5. FURTHER INFORMATION

Cleaver, H., Unell, I. & Aldgate, J. (2011) "**Children's needs-parenting capacity: child abuse, parental mental illness, learning disability, substance misuse, and domestic violence.**" 2nd Edition. The Stationary Office.