

Childhood Neglect: Improving Outcomes for Children

Learning Outcomes

To identify concerns about parenting capacity that may contribute to neglect.

Audience Groups 3-6 (Working Together 2010)

Time 30 minutes

Key Reading

Cleaver, H. and Nicholson, D. (2007) Parental Learning Disability and Children's Needs Family Experiences and Effective Practice. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Cleaver, H., Unell, I. and Aldgate, J. (2011) Children's Needs – Parenting Capacity. Child Abuse: Parental mental illness, learning disability, substance misuse and domestic violence (2nd edition). London: The Stationery Office.

Department of Health, Department of Education and Skills (2007) Good practice guidelines in working with parents with learning disabilities. Available online only: <http://dh.gov.uk>.

HM Government (2009) Valuing People Now: a new three year strategy for people with learning disabilities 'Making it happen for everyone'. <http://www.valuingpeoplenow.dh.gov.uk>.

HM Government (2010) Working Together to Safeguard Children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. London: Department for Children, Schools and Families.

McGaw, S. and Newman, T. (2005) What Works for Parents with Learning Disabilities? Ilford: Barnardos.

Links to Common Core

Common Core 1 Effective communication and engagement with children, young people, their families and carers (skills: listening and building empathy). Develop and use effective communication systems appropriate to the audience.

Common Core 2 Child and young person development (knowledge: understand how babies, children and young people develop). Know that development includes emotional, physical, intellectual, social, moral and character growth, and know that they can all affect one another.

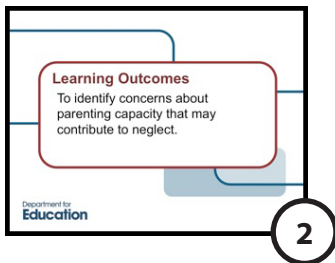
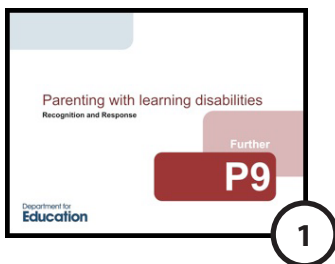
Common Core 3 Safeguarding and promoting the welfare of the child (skills: personal skills). Understand the different forms and extent of abuse and their impact on children's development.

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Notes



Learning outcomes.



Working Together (2010) provides information on the causes of learning disabilities. It can have its roots in genetic factors: infection before birth, brain injury at birth, brain infections or brain damage after birth. A learning disability varies from mild to profound, but all are a lifelong condition that can affect many areas of functioning.

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Traditionally, scores on standardised intelligence tests have been used to define learning disability. However, difficulties arise over how to classify those with borderline IQs (70 to 85), and individuals who exhibit different ability levels across the components of IQ tests. The Department of Health's definition of learning disability encompasses people with a broad range of disabilities:

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

(HM Government 2010, p279)

Many adults will need support in relation to tasks of everyday living in order to maintain an adequate standard of living. However, having a learning disability does not mean that new skills cannot be learnt, but the person may have more difficulty in developing knowledge and skills than those adults without learning disabilities.

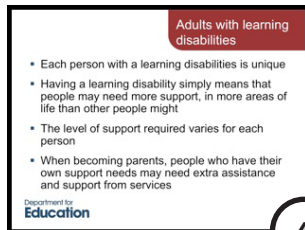
IQ is measured using a standardised cognitive assessment that is administered by a trained professional, usually a psychologist.

Adaptive functioning impairments cover a range of daily living, communication and social skills. Learning impairments are not generic and functioning varies greatly from individual to individual; many have different causes, environmental and genetic. Difficulties may be associated with other co-occurring conditions such as Autism, Epilepsy, Physical Health and Mobility Problems and Mental Health Difficulties.

Discussion point: What do people understand by the different terms i.e. what do people think is the definition of a learning difficulty and a learning disability?

The different definitions can cause great confusion, parents with learning disabilities may find these terms stigmatising, particularly if diagnosed in adulthood. It is important to gain an understanding of how a parent feels. A parent may have greater difficulty in their everyday lives than perhaps others do and use their terms or ways of describing the things they experience. Often parents do have insight into the things they find more difficult, but do find impairments or limitations embarrassing or can feel upset about being 'different'.

People with learning disabilities can go to great lengths to disguise or mask the things they find difficult to prevent the experience of feeling inadequate or shame – just as any other person might not want others to see that they are finding something hard or lack skills. Sometimes the masking or disguising of impairments or lack of skills can be seen as a negative thing by workers or services, and interpreted in ways such as "lacking insight" or "lacking co-operation" or "hiding important information". However this is natural human behaviour as nobody likes to be seen as not good at something in front of others. Sensitive, empathic approaches will enable the person to feel comfortable and not judged negatively when discussing skill deficits. It is essential to emphasise strengths and provide opportunities for a person with learning disabilities to demonstrate the things they do well and are good at.

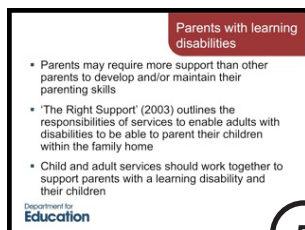


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People with learning disabilities are unique: what they can do well and what they may need support with will differ for each person. This is the same for anyone.

Many people with learning disabilities can live completely independently and have little or no contact with support services from health or social care. The rights of people with learning disabilities have been recognised in law, but despite the legislation there is still much discrimination and inequality in service provision.

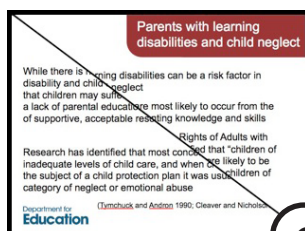
People with learning disabilities remain a disadvantaged and vulnerable group in society. Health and social care may not be readily accessed by people with learning disabilities.



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Parents with learning disabilities may require more support than other parents to develop and/or maintain their parenting skills at an adequate level over time due to difficulties in gaining skills within set time-frame or in adapting their skills to meet their child's changing needs.

Joint working between children's and adult services is particularly important if there are concerns with regard to the adequacy of care provided by parents with learning disabilities.



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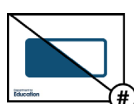
McGaw and Newman (2005) identify that learning disabilities is a risk factor for parents in relation to child neglect. They conducted a review of the research in the area and concluded that "Neglect appears to occur as a result of acts of omission rather than commission".

Therefore, parent education and skills teaching are likely to be required as a core part of any intervention when neglect may be identified.

An article by Booth and Booth (1993) highlighted that professionals must be aware of the "presumption of incompetence" when working with parents with learning disabilities. Frequently parents may be viewed as not being able to cope solely on the basis of having learning disabilities. Skills and strengths can be overlooked and the person does not get the opportunity to build on and develop existing skills.

Reports are often detailed and complex, and so parents are unaware of many of the grounds for the child protection proceedings. Remedial attempts are often impinged by lack of funding and pressure to make quick decisions in the long term interests of the child. When children are fostered, contact visits may be a small proportion of the child's week. This can impact on the developing relationship damage attachment between the parent and child. If the child or children need to be accommodated in the long term, open adoptions appear to be few and far between. Emotional support for parents with learning disabilities post-removal is also limited, this does appear particularly so for fathers with learning disabilities.

While there is no association between parental learning disability and child abuse or wilful neglect, there is evidence that children may suffer neglect from omission as a result of a lack of parental education combined with the unavailability of supportive, acceptable resources (McGaw and Newman 2005). Research has identified that most concerns relate to inadequate levels of child care and when children became the subject of a child protection plan it was usually under the category of neglect or emotional abuse (Tymchuck and Andron 1990; Cleaver and Nicholson 2007).



Please Note Thumbnails of slides shown with a split screen indicate that the slide contains an animated sequence.

Parents with learning disabilities and child neglect

- Having a learning disability is not in itself a barrier to being a good parent
- Where a parent has learning disabilities, their needs should be assessed and appropriate support provided by services
- But parents may require no additional support from services for themselves or in their role as a parent

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Having a child may be a trigger for services considering whether there may be a presence of learning disabilities. This can occur when a person, who has been living independently, is coping with the additional demands that parenting brings and this brings them to the attention of services. Discrimination is widespread, and many people still hold negative views about the ability of people with learning disabilities to be good parents.

Parents with learning disabilities and child neglect

- Removal of a child from the care of a parent solely on the grounds they have a learning disability is not lawful
- "Good practice guidance in working with parents with learning disabilities" (DoH, DCSF & NHS 2007) outlines positive ways to work with and engage with parents to achieve "better outcomes for parents with learning disabilities and their children"

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There must be evidence of significant harm or likelihood of harm for family court proceedings to be instigated in cases of neglect.

What a child needs

- It is important to remember that their children will have the same developmental needs as all children
- Like all children, their wishes and feelings need to be ascertained
- Children will benefit from prompt assessment and provision of appropriate support for their parents
- Secure attachment relationships are vital and should be preserved unless the neglect means the child is suffering significant harm despite intervention over time

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The child's needs are the same as in any other family or caring situation. The child must have their needs met and to be protected from harm. The attachment relationship is crucial to a child. It is very distressing for the child to be separated from a parent and they can believe that it is their fault; for example thinking "if only I had kept my room tidy" if the household environment is part of the concerns being raised about neglect.

People do hold opinions that people with learning disabilities are at an increased likelihood of having children with learning disabilities. There may be an increased risk of this where there is a genetic component to the parent's learning disabilities, but where there has been an environmental cause, such as infection during pregnancy, birth trauma or trauma in pregnancy the risk is the same as for any other parent. However, if there is an indication of developmental delay in a child, then their needs will need to be assessed to see if they require further support or interventions. This may represent an additional challenge to parents with learning disabilities, as they may find it difficult to implement any guidelines for addressing these needs without material written at their level of understanding or repeated demonstrations of techniques.

It can be extremely hard to balance the rights of a parent with the rights of a child, but when there is a conflict of interest the needs of the child must always come first.

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How to support parents with learning disabilities

- Parents with learning disabilities need opportunities to parent and to demonstrate their skills
- Where a child is looked after, and assessment or, therapeutic or parenting skills work is being undertaken, then level of contact needs to be often enough to ensure opportunities for parents to learn
- Skills are most appropriately taught in the context in which the family will be living. Community based services may optimise skills development rather than teaching them in clinics or family centres

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Often parents with learning disabilities are assessed to such a degree that there can be a tendency for them to have to demonstrate a higher level of skill than may be expected from other parents and carers. Professionals can often lose sight of the reality that even the most caring and able parents do not deliver “perfect care” 100% of the time. (Particularly if they feel that they are under scrutiny, as the process of being evaluated can actually impair performance and as a result skills are underestimated).

Discussion point: Is this familiar to you?

How to support parents with learning disabilities

- Time for repetition and generalisation of any newly learned knowledge or skills
- For workers to provide simple, clear communication at all times
- Encouragement and use of positive, empathic approaches when undertaking assessments, skill development or support tasks
- Intellectual impairments assessed and identified, and appropriate support put in place at an early stage

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How to support parents with learning disabilities

- For the focus of objective assessments to be on whether the parent can meet the needs of the child
- Easily understood information and communication
- A consistent approach is essential
- To be supported to understand any child protection conferences or family court proceedings
- Parents may need assistance from advocacy services to enable their views to be represented
- Support to parent for the duration of their child's development

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Roles and responsibilities of professionals

- Gain knowledge and understanding of a parents' cognitive and adaptive impairments in order to develop strategies to enable skill deficits to be addressed
- Provide opportunities to reflect on their emotions, attitudes and values.
- Pay attention to the balance the best interests of a child and the best interests of the adult

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Consider whether the developmental needs of the child can be met, or whether some of their social and communication skills, and opportunities can be met in another context. Most parents without learning disabilities involve others to help provide support and education for their children that they themselves cannot provide due to lack of skill or lack of time.

Roles and responsibilities of professionals

- Children's social care services may require input from adult services during assessments including advice on best approaches
- The child will have a lead social worker
- To develop any knowledge and skills required to provide effective support to parents with learning disabilities

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People with learning disabilities need explanations or instructions to be concrete – not abstract. They need to be given extra time and patience to understand. They may need professionals to check they have really understood; it is helpful to ask the person to give a summary of any information or meeting to ensure that they have understood the key points. This provides an opportunity for clarifying any misunderstandings or communication difficulties.

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Assessment

Assess the following

- The person's own early childhood experiences
- The parental role models experienced – deficits can be due to lack of adequate care as a child themselves
- Parent's ability to learn or acquire new information and retain this over time
- Parent's ability to assess and respond to changing situations
- Parent's ability to prioritise appropriately the needs of self and others

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The same risk factors, such as mental health or domestic violence, may be present for parents with learning disabilities as those without. People with learning disabilities may struggle to understand how the behaviour of others relates to their own parenting situation.

A person with learning disabilities may be vulnerable themselves and consideration may need to be given to whether they themselves are at risk of being harmed and adult protection procedures instigated.

Assessment

Identify if any of the following are present:

- History of offending by self, partner or in the person's wider social or family network
- Alcohol and drug use by self, partner or in the person's wider social or family network
- Mental health, emotional or behavioural disabilities
- Relationship instability or risk of breakdown
- Debt or financial disabilities
- Inadequate social or family support
- No engagement with services and acceptance of support

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Barriers to assessment and service provision

Parents with learning disabilities can face significant barriers

- Widespread lack of availability of specialist services for assessments and provision of support adjusted to client's needs
- Services that are risk averse due to fears of media and litigation
- Lack of funding for the additional support required long term
- Time constraints that may not provide sufficient time for the in-depth assessment of parenting capacity required

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Funding can often be a problem – and where funding between adult and child services is not joined up, then conflict over 'who should provide what' can impact on the parent's capacity care for their child with appropriate support.

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