



TEA-BREAK GUIDE



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.

Parents with Learning Difficulties

A 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 may face a wide range of barriers to bringing up their own children successfully, and often recognise that they need practical support and help to enable them to be the best parents possible.

The support needs include the ability to meet a child's developmental needs, as well as their own; personal care of the child; preparation of meals and drinks; attending the child's health needs; parental involvement in indoor and outdoor play; support in education and help to identify potential risks to their own child(ren).

Where a parent has a learning disability it is important not to make assumptions about parental capacity. Having a learning disability does not mean that a person cannot learn new skills. Parents with 'learning difficulties' can be 'good enough' parents when support is put in place. Some parents will only need short term support, others however, will need on-going support. Most may need support at various different points of their family life cycle.

Issues to consider

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

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, social isolation / discrimination, poor housing or poverty.

Neglect through acts of omission rather than commission 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 to Children's Social Care.

Similarly, adults with learning disabilities may be Adults at Risk and targets of other adults who wish to exploit them in a variety of ways for their own gain.

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 Northamptonshire Young Carers may be appropriate in these situations.

As a professional working with parents with learning difficulties you may also find that children may exceed their parent's intellect at a relatively young age.

Action to be taken

Where a parent with learning difficulties appears not to be able to meet the needs of their child's a referral should be made to Children's Social Care.

It is essential that staff working in adults and children's services work together in the application of child protection procedures to ensure the safety of the child and, where appropriate, support for the adult is provided. Joint working will include the adult's workers providing any information with regard to the parent / carer's cognitive ability and functioning and ability to attain and sustain change.

Professionals working with the children must assess the individual needs of each child and within this incorporate information provided by adult services. Children's Social Care, will undertake an assessment, and include input from Adult Services and other relevant agencies. Specialist learning disability and other assessments should be considered as a means to determine whether or not the parent requires 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 learning disability.

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 to look after their children, Adult Services should take the lead on assessment and care planning;
- Where parents need support in the medium-long term, Adult Services 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 assessment and planning with specialist input from Adult Services.

It is particularly important to avoid the situation where poor standards of parental care, which do not meet threshold, subsequently deteriorate because of a lack of support. 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 by ensuring Early Help is provided at this stage.

Further Information

[Good practice guidance on working with parents with a learning disability.](#)

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

- Accessible information and communication;
- Clear and coordinated 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.

Communication - communicating with parents in a way they understand. This may include:

- Taking more time to explain things;
- Telling parents things more than once and checking their understanding;
- Considering in advance how best to prepare for meetings, and discussing with parents whether they would like an Advocate to support them;
- Hands-on approaches;
- Step by step pictures showing how to undertake a task;
- Repeating tasks regularly and providing opportunities for frequent practice;
- Use of 'props', for example, containers which will hold the right amount of milk.

Parents should be told, in plain language, what any assessment is, what it is for, what it will involve and what will happen afterwards. They may need to be told more than once - for example, a parent may need to be reminded what happened at the last meeting.

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 communication with the parents.