

LSCP factsheet: Parental learning disabilities

What is a learning disability?

A learning disability is a reduced intellectual ability. It can affect how people process and understand information and carry out day-to-day activities. Learning disabilities can be mild, moderate, severe or profound (these are labels used within the NHS, but not necessarily within other settings such as Educational Psychology). In all cases a learning disability is lifelong.

What is the difference between a learning disability and a learning difficulty?

A learning difficulty refers to something which makes it harder to learn. For example, dyslexia, dyscalculia and dysgraphia. People who are neurodivergent, such as having ADHD, might also find it harder to learn. People with learning difficulties do *not* have reduced intellectual ability and there is no evidence that having a learning difficulty has any adverse impact on parenting ability in and of itself.

What impact does a learning disability have on a person?

The different ways a learning disability might impact a person depend on the level of the disability. For example:

Mild

- Slightly below-average intellectual functioning (IQ 50-70)
- Can usually communicate effectively, though may struggle with complex language or abstract concepts
- Can manage most daily tasks with minimal support
- May need occasional support with complex tasks, e.g. budgeting

Moderate

- More noticeable delays in intellectual development (IQ 35-49)
- May use simple speech or alternative communication methods
- May need regular support with daily tasks, e.g. cooking and hygiene
- Ongoing support required for independent living

Severe

- Significant intellectual impairment (IQ 20-30)
- Limited verbal communication, may rely on gestures and symbols
- Requires assistance with most aspects of daily life
- Lifelong, intensive support and supervision

Profound

- Very limited understanding (IQ below 20)
- May not use formal communication, relies on facial expressions / body language
- Dependent on others for all personal care and activity
- 24/7 care and support in all areas of life

What impact does a learning disability have on parenting ability?

The different ways a learning disability *might* impact on a parent's ability to care for their child also depend on the level of their disability. Some examples are below:

Mild

- Often capable of parenting effectively with minimal support.
- May struggle with tasks like budgeting, health appointments and school communication.
- May need help understanding child developmental milestones.

Moderate

- Can parent with regular and structured support.
- Difficulty with planning, routines and responding to unexpected situations.
- May need help with understanding safety, nutrition and emotional needs.

Severe

- Likely to have significant difficulty managing parenting tasks independently.
- Limited understanding of child safety, health and emotional needs.
- May not recognise signs of illness or distress in a child.

Profound

- Typically unable to parent independently due to very limited cognitive and communication abilities.
- Dependent on others for their own care and unable to meet basic needs of a child without full-time support.

It is important to note that these are just examples, and an assessment of parenting ability should be completed to determine whether a parent with learning disabilities will require support to enable them to care for their children and whether the level of learning disability is such that it may impair the health or development of the child.

What is the impact for children where a parent has a learning disability?

A parental learning disability does not necessarily have an adverse impact on a child's developmental needs, but it is essential to always assess the implications for each child in the family. There are a number of ways that children of a parent with a learning disability *might* be adversely impacted or suffer harm which we need to be alert to:

- Where a parent has enduring and / or severe learning disabilities, children in the household are more likely to suffer significant harm through emotional abuse, neglect, physical and/or sexual abuse;
- Children of a parent with a learning disability are at increased risk from inherited learning disability and more vulnerable to psychiatric disorders and behavioural problems, including alcohol / substance misuse and self- harming behaviour;
- Children might have caring responsibilities inappropriate to their years placed upon them, including looking after siblings;
- Neglect might lead to impaired growth and development, physical ill health or problems in terms of being out of parental control;
- Mothers with learning disabilities may be targeted by abusers leading to the abuse and exploitation of them and their children.

How do I know if a parent has a learning disability?

Most learning disabilities are identified and diagnosed during childhood. However, a parent or people working with them may seek a diagnosis if they observe a parent who struggles to manage daily tasks or has long-standing difficulties that have not been assessed.

There is no specialist pathway to request a learning disability assessment. It is extremely difficult to get an NHS assessment for a possible learning disability (or difficulty) in adulthood. If diagnosis has not been made in childhood, the adult usually needs to access a private assessment. This may be available via Occupational Health if the adult is employed. Advice can be requested from the family GP.

What do I need to do if I am working with a parent who has a learning disability?

The primary duty is to ensure the promotion of the child's welfare and protecting them from any risk of harm. This is a challenging and complex area of work and so assessment needs to be undertaken in collaboration with adult services.

You need to ensure you are considering and actively seeking information about:

- Whether the parent has a learning disability or a learning difficulty, and if everyone in the multiagency network is clear about this?
- Whether Adult Social Care is already involved and can provide advice and support?
- The level of the parent's learning disability and how this impacts their ability to communicate, manage daily tasks, understand and respond to their child's needs and react in unexpected situations?
- Who else is in the family support network and what role do they contribute to parenting?
- Is there a professional support network around the parent and what are their views in relation to parenting ability?
- Is an advocate required to work with the parent?
- Focus on the child and their needs.
- Be clear about what life is like for the child, based on their own voice.
- Be clear about any actual or likely impact on the child's health and development.
- Consider if the child has any caring responsibilities.

Further support

- Make a [referral](#) to Adult Social Care to request a Care Act Assessment. Parents may be eligible for care and support if they are unable to achieve two or more outcomes, including carrying out caring responsibilities for a child.
- Make a referral to the [Carers Hub](#) to request support for children with caring responsibilities.

Further reading & resources:

- [Working Together With Parents Network](#) a free-to-join network that supports professionals working with parents with learning disabilities and learning difficulties and their children.
- [Mencap's information on learning disability and other conditions](#)