

The right support: helping parents with learning disabilities to parent well

Beth Tarleton, researcher at Bristol University, discusses the needs of parents with learning disabilities and the resources available to professionals working with them

Midwives and health visitors, as well as the wide variety of other professionals involved in providing family support, are recognising an increase in the number of parents for whom additional support is required for them to understand and engage with parenting.¹ While there are no definitive figures, a recent estimate suggests that there are likely to be over 53,000 parents with learning disabilities in England alone.²

Parents with learning disabilities

Parents who have learning disabilities are parents who often struggled at mainstream school or may have attended special school and may not have had support services in the past. They may have been able to get by on their own or not been eligible for support from adult learning disability services because their IQ was too high (learning disability services are only generally available for adults with an IQ of below 70).

There is a long-standing field of research around parents with learning disabilities (also known as learning difficulties or, internationally, as intellectual disabilities) that has shown that adults with learning disabilities can be good parents if they are provided with support and information in a way that is suitable for them; abstracts for all of the papers in the field can be found at <http://www.healthystart.net.au/>

Support needs

Parents with learning disabilities are entitled to the ongoing support they need. Government guidance recommends that the following be made available by all professionals involved with families headed by a parent or parents with learning disabilities:

- accessible information and communication;
- clear, co-ordinated referral and assessment procedure and processes, eligibility criteria and care pathways;
- support designed to meet the needs of parents and children based on assessment of their strengths and needs;
- long-term support where necessary;
- access to independent advocacy.¹

Services around the country are beginning to actively engage with the issues faced by parents with learning disabilities, which include the fear that if they ask for the help

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they need they will be seen as failing and have their children removed.³ There are a number of specialist services for parents with learning disabilities while in other areas multi-agency protocols and pathways have been developed to facilitate co-ordinated support to these parents.

Supporting professionals to help parents

There is an increasing amount of help and support available for professionals working with parents with learning difficulties. One of the most prominent organisations offering support is CHANGE, an organisation of disabled people in Leeds. CHANGE have developed a range of resources including easy-to-understand

books such as the *You and Your Little Baby Book 0-1*, *You and Your Little Child 1-5*, and sets of pictures that can enable professionals to make support materials appropriate to the particular family (<http://www.changepeople.co.uk/>). There is also a forthcoming book about pregnancy. CHANGE also provide training about how parents see their support needs and good ways of providing support to parents with learning disabilities.

Another organisation, the Working Together with Parents Network - a network run by Bristol University which aims to spread positive practice and to promote policy change in this field - provides support for professionals working with parents with learning disabilities. The network is free for to join and provides regular updates about policy, training, resources via email as well as an informative website with links to relevant, practice examples, discussion boards and resources. Any professional working with parents with learning difficulties is welcome to join (www.right-support.org.uk). Individual parents and parents' groups are invited to become part of the network by contacting Agnes or Fiona on 0113 3880011.

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References

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