

Practice Point: Best Practice in Family Support

There are many assumptions about parents with learning difficulties that can impact on the way families are supported. Being aware of these assumptions and knowing which are supported by evidence can help practitioners to support these families. Just like other Australian families, receiving evidence-informed support for their family is critical for parents with learning difficulties.

Key facts

We know that parents with learning difficulties are able to learn and apply adequate parenting skills.

Learn more in the tipsheet on Learning Difficulties: Myths and Facts.

For all families, including those where parents have learning difficulties, having access to family support by professionals helps with successful parenting. If families don't have access to family support it's more likely that they will have difficulties with their parenting.

Practice tips

Collaborate with parents:

- Ensure that parents participate in setting the agenda for your work together.
- Ask parents about their service and support needs. Parents are often the best judges of what they would like assistance with. Sometimes parents may need help to recognise needs particularly if they have had little experience with children or have had poor parenting models.
- Involve parents in any discussion or decision-making about their children, their partner or spouse, and their family.
- Be ready to learn from parents.
- Assess the support available to individual parents, taking into account the parents' views about this support and whether or not it brings out the best in their parenting.

Collaborate with services:

Develop inter-agency collaboration that promotes:

- a family-centred focus so that the interests of both parents and children are served
- prioritising preventative work over crisis intervention
- using mainstream services for parents and their children as well as specialised support services.

Use family support practices that are supported by evidence:

- Operate from a sound working knowledge of current evidence informed research. Use this knowledge to raise awareness about evidence informed practice in the health, social services, education and legal sectors, and in the community at large.

Consider the context in which families live:

- Consider the socio-economic and community context of each parent.
- Be sensitive to families' living arrangements, and how this influences parent access to support. For example, consider who is available to support a chosen intervention, or the amount of physical space available to the family when planning interventions.
- Be wary of viewing 'family' as mother, father and children. Keep in mind different family constellations, parent networks and relationships.
- Try to understand parents' life experiences and the impact of these on current behaviour. Consider parents' self-esteem, social skills, internal/external control, social role, and problem solving skills when planning an intervention. For example, many people with learning difficulties have been encouraged to remain dependent on family or service providers, and so may not have had enough opportunities to learn new skills or to prepare for adult life and parenthood.
- Check the physical health of parents. Parents with learning difficulties as a group tend to have health problems and a high risk of poor long-term health for their children, compared to other families. Help parents to understand and get the health care they need.

Provide long-term support:

- Promote stable, long term support networks, such as opportunities for parents to establish and develop supportive ties with neighbours and friends. This is particularly important for single parents.
- Facilitate participation and belonging in the community by engaging parents in activities outside the family home. Linking parents to their community is critical for ongoing, long-term parenting success.
- Provide opportunities for parents to develop friendships by starting parent-to-parent support groups and by teaching parents the skills to develop friendships.

Adopt a strength based approach:

- Believe that parents can succeed.
- Be wary of labelling. Many children who, whilst labelled at school as having learning difficulties, successfully live their adult lives in the wider community without needing specialist services. Look beyond the disability or learning difficulty label. Be careful not to lose sight of each individual's ability in the face of their learning difficulties.
- Talk to parents as adults.
- Do things with them, not for them. Be wary of imposing your advice and giving overwhelming amounts of advice.
- Talk to parents face-to-face.
- Uphold parents' rights to be regarded as the parent of their child. Adults with learning difficulties may have the same dream of parenthood as any other adults.
- Offer a flexible and responsive support program, allowing parents to participate on their own terms and learn at their own pace.
- Focus on personal growth as well as skills learnt.

Provide support which meets parents' identified needs for social, vocational and community skills. That is, support that can help parents with:

- Parenting skills - teaching parents about how to recognise when children are at risk from others or their own behaviour; how to set boundaries for safety; and how to respond to the challenges of adolescence.
- Living skills - equipping parents to use public transport, budget, shop, and cook healthy meals.
- Self-esteem and assertiveness skills - fostering greater inner strength and confidence.
- Informal social support - facilitating the development of supportive relationships with other people, particularly other parents.
- Access to mainstream services - providing information about or introducing parents to local community services.
- Advocacy - either advocating on the parent's behalf or empowering them to advocate for themselves.

What we know

Support required by parents

Help with child care and child development is the most common support need reported by parents, their family and service providers. This includes understanding child development and how to deal with medical emergencies.

Parents also report needing assistance with:

- community participation
- exploring work options
- knowing what community services are available and how to access them
- developing self-esteem and assertiveness skills
- meeting people and making friends
- advocating on behalf of themselves and their children.

Want to know more?

To find other publications about family support for parents with learning difficulties, explore the Healthy Start website's Article Search tool under For Professionals.

My Neighbourhood on Raising Children Network (www.raisingchildren.net.au) shows parenting resources in your area of Australia, such as childcare services, kid-friendly spots, child health services and activities.

References

Adapted from:

Australian Family and Disability Studies Research Collaboration (2004). In Practice: Assessment.

Victorian Parenting Centre (2003). Best practice in parenting education: Understanding and supporting parents with learning difficulties.