

Specialist leads, teams or hubs ensure effective, family-focused support for parents with learning disabilities/difficulties and their children

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Getting Things Changed

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About the research

Parents with learning difficulties are over-represented in the child protection system typically due to concerns regarding neglect by omission. In addition to having a learning difficulty, they often face a wide range of barriers to ensuring positive outcomes for their children.

The project aimed to understand what professionals, and the parents with learning difficulties they supported, understood as 'successful' professional practice (whether or not the child(ren) ultimately remained with the family) when there are concerns regarding neglect of their children.

The research took place in three Local Authorities with specialist parents with learning difficulties teams. We interviewed nine mothers with learning difficulties and some of the different practitioners (38) they had each worked with, as well as nine services managers and commissioners.

The term learning difficulties is used here to include parents with a diagnosed learning disability and those without, who often don't meet the threshold for support from the adult learning disabilities team, but who struggle with everyday life and ensuring the welfare of their children.

Policy implications

- Commissioners, policy makers and senior managers need a strategic overview of local needs and resources. Specialist leads, teams or hubs are key to providing this information.
- Local authorities should resource specialists in working with parents with learning difficulties, whether individuals, in teams or in hubs who can gather and share expertise, drive activity, set the appropriate speed and direction of family work, and link with every practitioner involved in a case, to ensure a holistic, family-focused approach. They can also provide consultancy or training for other professionals.
- Parents require long-term or recurrent support. Support should be consistent and flexible as a parent's learning difficulty is lifelong and their needs and circumstances change over time.
- Practitioners should build and maintain mutually trusting relationships with parents so that, where possible, ongoing light-touch support can be provided, reducing the need for repeated crisis-driven interventions.
- Senior managers in health and social care should endorse multi-agency protocols and appoint champions who promote coordinated practice and quicker resolution of case-management issues.
- Managers should also ensure specific named contacts are identified and that systems are in place to embed effective practice which is not wholly reliant on particular individuals.
- Adults and Children's services should pool budgets to enable effective joint working.

Key findings

- Professionals started from the Children Act 1989 presumption of enabling children to remain with their families, where possible. However, they recognised that successful practice was defined by process - how parents were worked with and the nature of the support offered - and could still take place even if, in the end, the child was removed from the parents' care.
- The professionals understood that the parents' learning difficulties did not automatically result in an inability to parent. They believed that the parents needed support to overcome the wide range of barriers and to ensure the well-being of their children. They recognised that the quality of support provided contributed to positive outcomes for the children.
- Professionals developed positive relationships with parents, were honest about their concerns about their child/ren's welfare and tailored how they worked to the individual parents. Parents who had previously lost children, had kept later children, with support.
- Local guidance on working with parents with learning difficulties operationalised the key elements of the Good Practice Guidance on working with parents with a learning disability (WTPN 2016, DH/DfES 2007). It was found that

Working with parents requires:

↓
Time
Trust
Tenacity
Truthfulness
Transparency
Tailored response

- Two models of special parenting services were observed. A **Consultation model** where parental learning disability specialists were called in to support or advise other practitioners such as health visitors / school nurses, and a **Hub model** in which specialists co-ordinated other practitioners' involvement with the family.
- Systems to measure and plan for anticipated numbers of parents with learning difficulties who might need support were lacking.

Further information:

This research was part of a large grant, 'Tackling Disabling Practices: co-production and change', funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) ES/M008339/1, led by Val Williams. For more information about the project: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/sps/gettingthingschanged/about-the-project/>

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- Working Together with Parents Network (www.wtpn.co.uk) - Supports professionals working with parents with learning difficulties and learning disabilities, and their children.
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- The President's Guidance: Family proceedings: Parents with a Learning Disability. <https://family-proceedings-parents-with-a-learning-disability>.
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I almost feel you need a champion in there, somebody who's very passionate about the issues, but you also need somebody more senior at the strategic level, who can take things forward and make service-level changes. So when we've got the right people in post, it's really, really good.

