

The child with general learning disability

Factsheet for parents and teachers

About this factsheet

This is one in a series of factsheets for parents, teachers and young people entitled *Mental Health and Growing Up*. The aims of these factsheets are to provide practical, up-to-date information about mental health problems (emotional, behavioural and psychiatric disorders) that can affect children and young people. This factsheet describes what a general learning disability is and the possible causes. It also provides practical advice about the help that is available to young people with a general learning disability and their families.

Introduction

What is meant by learning disability?

Learning disability used to be known as mental handicap or mental retardation. A child with a **general learning disability** finds it more difficult to learn, understand and do things compared to other children of the same age. The degree of disability can vary greatly. Some children will never learn to speak and even when they grow up will need help with looking after themselves – feeding, dressing or going to the toilet. On the other hand, the disability may be mild and the child will grow up to become independent.

General learning disability is different from **specific learning difficulty** (see Factsheet 11 on specific learning difficulties), which means that the person finds one particular thing hard, but manages well in everything else. For example, a child can have a specific learning difficulty in reading, writing or understanding what is said to them, but have no problem with learning in other areas of life.

What causes general learning disability?

Causes include genetic factors, infection before birth, brain injury at birth, brain infections or brain damage after birth. Examples include Down's syndrome, Fragile X syndrome and cerebral palsy. In nearly one-half of children affected, the cause of the disability remains unknown.

The effects of learning disability

Children or young people who have a general learning disability are aware of what goes on around them. However, their ability to understand and communicate may be very limited, and they can find it very hard to express themselves. Speech problems can make it even harder to make other people understand their feelings and needs. They are often frustrated and upset by their own limitations. When they compare themselves to other children, they can feel low and think badly of themselves.

For a parent, it can be very distressing to find out that your child has a general learning disability. It may be hard for you and other members of the family to understand why your child is like this. You may not understand the full extent of the problems. It can be very hard for you to communicate with your learning disabled child, and difficult for you to manage their behaviour.

Brothers and sisters may be affected in a number of ways. They may feel jealous of the

attention given to their disabled brother or sister or embarrassed by their behaviour. They may even be teased at school. Quite often they can feel personally responsible for their disabled sibling or a distressed parent.

Learning disability and mental health

A general learning disability is not a mental illness. Unlike mental illness, from which people normally recover, it is a life-long condition. However, children with learning disability, especially if they have problems such as epilepsy, are more likely to develop mental health problems than other children.

What can be done to help?

Learning and development

It is important to recognise, as soon as possible, that a child is learning and developing slowly. It is only when the problem is recognised that the

child and their family can be offered the help and support they need. The health visitor plays an important role in recognising slow development in the years before school.

Child Development Team

As your child gets older, a number of other people can help with their particular needs. They will often work together in a group known as the **Child Development Team**. This team includes specialists such as community paediatricians, nurses, psychologists and speech therapists. It sometimes includes a child psychiatrist. In some areas, there are special services for children with learning disabilities. If necessary, your general practitioner can refer you to the specialist team in your area.

Schooling

School is particularly difficult for children with learning disabilities because it is all about learning. Local education departments can make special arrangements to help them. These vary to suit the child. For example, if they are able to cope comfortably with other people, they may go to an ordinary school but have special forms of teaching. On the other hand, if they have a more severe disability, they may need to go to a special school.

When your child is old enough, the educational department psychologist will prepare a **Statement of Special Educational Needs**. This sets out what special help the child needs and takes into account the views and wishes of the parents.

In most areas, there are also other services. Respite care and holiday play schemes can give parents a break. Parent support groups can put them in touch with other people who are coping with similar problems. The local social services department will be able to advise, both on these and on the benefits to which parents are entitled.

Sources of further information

- Contact a Family offers information and advice for parents of children with any special needs or disability. 209–211 City Road, London EC1V 1JN; Tel: 020 7608 8700; fax: 020 7608 8701; Minicom 020 7608 8702; Helpline 0808 808 3555 (freephone for parents and families 10.00 a.m.–4.00 p.m., Mon.–Fri.); e-mail: info@cafamily.org.uk; www.cafamily.org.uk.
- The Department for Education (Northern Ireland) has produced *Special Educational Needs – A Guide for Parents* (www.deni.gov.uk), a helpful guide to the statementing process and source of useful addresses. Tel: 0845 902 2260.
- MENCAP (Royal Society for Mentally Handicapped Children and Adults) produces a Family Resource Pack, which contains very useful information. National Centre, 123 Golden Lane, London EC1Y 0RT; Tel: 020 7454 0454 (check your directory for details of your local branch); helpline 0808 808 1111; e-mail: help@mencap.org.uk; www.mencap.org.uk.
- RESCARE (National Society for Mentally Handicapped People in Residential Care): Rayner House, 23 Higher Hillgate, Stockport SK1 3ER; Tel: 0161 474 7323; e-mail: office@rescare.org.uk; www.rescare.org.uk.
- The *Mental Health and Growing Up* series contains 36 factsheets on a range of common mental health problems. To order the pack, contact Book Sales at the Royal College of Psychiatrists, 17 Belgrave Square, London SW1X 8PG; tel: 020 7235 2351, ext. 146; fax: 020 7245 1231; e-mail: booksales@rcpsych.ac.uk, or you can download them from www.rcpsych.ac.uk.

Like all children, children with learning disabilities continue to progress and learn throughout their childhood – but more slowly.

Disability does not stop a child from having a full and enjoyable life. The aim of all the special services is to help these children to have lives that are as enjoyable and fulfilling as those of other people.

References

- Carr, A. (ed.) (2000) *What Works with Children and Adolescents? A Critical Review of Psychological Interventions with Children, Adolescents and their Families*. London: Brunner-Routledge.
- Rutter, M. & Taylor, E. (eds) (2002) *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* (4th edn). London: Blackwell.
- Scott, A., Shaw, M. & Joughin, C. (2001) *Finding the Evidence: A Gateway to the Literature in Child and Adolescent Mental Health* (2nd edn). London: Gaskell.