

## Appendix 2: Some Research Evidence

- There is evidence for a genetic link between parental learning disability and child development delay
- Learning disabilities affects 1 – 2.5% of the general population in the Western world, and encompasses many different conditions. It can lead to major functional impairment and lifelong need for support and interventions.<sup>1</sup>
- Where families do not get enough support, any genetic vulnerability to development delay may be compounded by lack of environmental stimulation<sup>2</sup>
- The IQ influences the ability to parent but would not by itself, incapacitate adults with learning disabilities from providing “good-enough” parenting to their children (Booth & Booth, 1994). One specific aspect however, of child development on which parental intellect appears to have an impact is language development. This is an area where it has been consistently shown that parents struggle to provide appropriate language stimulation for their child.<sup>3</sup>
- The emphasis of the assessments must be on the impact of the disabilities on the parents’ ability to care for their children and the resources required to reduce it. IQ does not relate in any systematic way to parenting competence until it falls below 55-60.<sup>4</sup> Below this level parenting is less competent, generalisation of learnt skills is poor and relapses are likely. Assessment of parenting capacity needs to include assessment of the parents’ functional ability.
- Research evidence<sup>5</sup> found that parents with learning disabilities encounter increasing difficulties in coping as the child(ren) get older (particularly boys, if the child is more intelligent and without a learning difficulty), or another child is added.<sup>6</sup>
- Research also shows that families where parents have learning disabilities are socially isolated; economically disadvantaged<sup>7</sup> and many of these parents have histories of disadvantaged childhoods with repeated experiences of failure, segregation and abuse, which result in low self-esteem<sup>8</sup>.
- Parents also report their difficulty in forming and maintaining positive relationships. People with learning disabilities are more vulnerable to forming relationships with partners who may go on to abuse their children or the partners have difficulties themselves e.g. alcohol / drug use or mental health problems<sup>9</sup>
- It is not always the parent who has learning disability who poses the risk to the child. Booth and Booth interviewed 30 adults (“informants”) who had been brought up by a

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<sup>1</sup> McGaw (2000) “What works for Parents with Learning Disabilities”. Barnardo’s Report, Essex

<sup>2</sup> As above

<sup>3</sup> (DOH, 2000 Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families., Reader, Chapter 18)

<sup>4</sup> McGaw, S.; Beckley, K.; Connolly, N. & Ball, K. (1999). Parenting Assessment Manual. Trecare NHS Trust.

<sup>5</sup> P. J. Accardo; B. Y. Whitman Children of mentally retarded parents *Am J Dis Child*. 1990

<sup>6</sup> McGaw (2000) “What works for Parents with Learning Disabilities”. Barnardo’s Report, Essex

<sup>7</sup> Fotheringham, 1980, 1981, cited in Parenting with Learning Disability – Lessons for Practitioners; Booth & Booth. *Br. J. Social Work* (1993) 23, 459 - 480

<sup>8</sup> Gath, 1988; Schilling, 1982, Cotson et. al, 2001. Chapter 18 Implementing the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families when a Parent has a Learning Disability. In: DoH and Home Office Department for Education and Employment. Reader - Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families. London: Stationary

<sup>9</sup> McGaw, S. (1998). Working with parents who happen to have intellectual disabilities. In: E. Emerson, C. Hatton, J. Bromley & A. Caine (Eds.). Clinical Psychology and People with Intellectual Disabilities. Wiley

learning disabled parent or parents. Over half of the informants (16), including 10 women (six with learning disabilities), disclosed that they had been the victims of physical or sexual abuse. In only one instance was the abuser reported to be the parent with learning disabilities. Five informants accused their father without learning disabilities. Otherwise the perpetrator was named as a stepfather or stepmother, a brother or sister, or someone outside the family.

- Histories of trauma, abuse or neglect are proportionally higher in learning disability. This can have an impact on their ability to form secure attachment in adulthood<sup>10 2</sup>
- People with learning disabilities are also at higher risk of mental health problems. Studies report up to 50% risk of mental illness in adults with learning disability.<sup>11</sup>
- Poverty and disadvantage cannot entirely account for the difficulties disproportionately experienced by parent with learning disability. Interventions must address individual, environmental and wider social problems, such as lack of social support.<sup>12</sup>
- UK Family Court Proceedings involving parents with an intellectual (learning) disability found that 15% for care applications involve parents with learning disabilities. Parents who have Learning disabilities are 60 times more likely to be involved in Care Proceedings than it would be expected from their numbers in the general population. This study shows that 75 % of children of parents with learning disabilities were removed and 40% put up for adoption<sup>13</sup>

### Neglect and Learning Disability

- Neglect appears to occur out of omission, due to lack of knowledge, when parents have a learning disability.<sup>14</sup> It is however unclear whether the frequency of neglect is any greater than that seen among other poor people. While IQ by itself (55-60) is a predictor of neglect, the best predictor appears to be the absence of suitable societal or familial supports, who can prevent neglectful conditions.<sup>14</sup>
- The greatest lack of knowledge for healthcare, safety and emergency responsiveness occurs with illnesses or emergencies that require good identification and understanding of the significance of symptoms and often complex responses (e.g. choking or poisoning and for which there is the greatest potential danger for the child).<sup>15</sup>
- It is important to consider in assessment, that parents with learning disabilities are not a heterogeneous group and that we should not make the assumption that having a learning disability will lead to neglect. Booth and Booth caution about the

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<sup>10</sup> Steel, 2002 in Psychologist, Vol.15, n 10.)

<sup>11</sup> Tymchuk 1990 cited in [Depression symptomatology in mothers with mild intellectual disability: An exploratory study](#) - Journal of Intellectual & Developmental Disability, 1994 - Taylor & Francis

<sup>12</sup> McGaw, S. (2000). [What works for parents with learning disabilities?](#) Bernardo's, Essex

<sup>13</sup> Booth, 2004 Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities Volume 1 Page 179 - September 2004 Volume 1 Issue 3-4

<sup>14</sup> Tymchuk, A. (1992). Predicting adequacy of parenting by people with mental retardation. [Child Abuse Neglect](#), 16, 165 – 78.

<sup>15</sup> Tymchuk, A. (1990a). Parents with mental retardation: a national survey. Washington: President's Committee on Mental Retardation.

Tymchuk, A. (1990b). Assessing home emergency skills of parents and others who are mentally handicapped. [Mental Handicap](#), 18, 136 - 142

importance of assessing the effects of intellectual limitation on parent child care, interaction and supervision.

Research <sup>16/17</sup> has also identified some “**key features of professional practice and service organisation**” that undermine parents in their parenting and heighten their vulnerability which include:

- *The presumption of incompetence* - or the belief that parents' innate limitations make them unfitted for parenthood and then only seeing the evidence that supports this preconception
- *A deficiency perspective* - or a tendency always to focus on people's deficits and on what they cannot do instead of their strengths and how to build on them
- *System abuse* - meaning policies and practices that harm the families they are supposed to support or protect. ‘System abuse is the unacknowledged scourge of families. It is rampant, pervasive and destructive of family life’
- *Competence-inhibiting support* - meaning support that deskills parents, reinforces their feelings of inadequacy and undermines their independence
- Parents with borderline learning disability (above IQ 70) may face difficulties in accessing services which can support them with intellectual difficulties

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<sup>16</sup> White Paper; Valuing People: A New Strategy for Learning Disability for the 21st Century; DOH (2001)

<sup>17</sup> Booth, T., & Booth, W. (1998) Growing Up with Parents who have Learning Disability and their children: review of research relevant to professional practice. [www.intellectualdisability.info/lifestages](http://www.intellectualdisability.info/lifestages)