

## Children of Parents with Learning Disabilities – Parenting Capacity

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### 1. Introduction

Parental learning disabilities do not necessarily have an adverse impact on a child's wellbeing, health and developmental needs, but it is essential to always assess the implications for each child (including the unborn child) in the family. Learning disabled parents may need support to develop the understanding, resources, skills and experience to meet the needs of their children. Such support is particularly necessary where the parent/s experience the additional stressors of: -

- Social exclusion.
- Having a child with learning disabilities, (see SPB Jersey [Safeguarding Disabled Children](#))
- Domestic abuse (see SPB Jersey [Domestic Abuse](#))
- Poor mental health (see SPB Jersey [Children of parents with Mental Health](#))

- Problematic Substance Use (see [Children of Parents who are Problematic Substance Users](#)).
- Have grown up in care (see SPB Jersey [Children Living Away from Home](#)).
- Are living in poverty, or in substandard accommodation.

## 2. Scope

This document focuses on the support needs of children (including the unborn child) and young people whose parents have learning disabilities. Where all agencies must recognise their primary duty to ensure the promotion of the child's wellbeing, health, development and welfare, including their protection from any risk of harm.

This guidance aligns with the [Jersey Children's First \(JCF\) Framework](#) in the aim of supporting parents to improve their children's wellbeing, enable them to be grow up safely, live healthy lives, learn, achieve, be valued and involved.

This guidance is for all practitioners (paid or unpaid) who work with children (including the unborn child), those who work with adults who are parents/carers and who therefore hold responsibility for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children. It is intended to be read alongside the [Children and Young People \(Jersey\) Law 2022](#), the commensurate [Statutory Guidance](#) and the Jersey Children's First Framework ([JCF](#)). Practitioners must follow the [Statutory Guidance](#) on sharing information (which follows [Data Protection \(Jersey\) Law 2018](#)) and follow the [SPB Jersey Child Protection Procedures](#) and the [Children and Young People Safeguarding Referrals Procedure](#)

## 2. Definition

When a person has learning disabilities, they have a permanent life-long condition usually identified in childhood and which has been diagnosed by a qualified health professional or a multi- disciplinary team.

A person with a learning disability may have care and support needs and may have difficulty, understanding complicated information and learning some skills.

Each person's learning disabilities are unique to them and are different for everyone. When a person with learning disabilities is a parent (or to become a parent), it is important not to make assumptions about their parental capacity, where multi-agency assessments will be required (see Chapter 6 – Assessments)

**Note** - Learning disabilities and learning difficulties are different - Learning difficulties are problems that a person faces in learning such as ADHD, dyspraxia and dyscalculia and does not affect an individual's intellect. For further information, see the [Mencap website](#).

There is a far wider group of parents, who may not have a diagnosis and would not generally fit the eligibility criteria for support from a Learning Disability Adults team but who may still require, referral, assessment and support following the [JCF Framework](#).

### 3. Indicators of Concern

Children of parents with learning difficulties are more likely to suffer harm or significant harm where they have: -

- Inherited learning disabilities - meaning their parent who has learning disabilities is caring for a child(ren) who have additional complex needs.
- Caring responsibilities (which may be inappropriate to their years), including looking after their siblings.
- A neglectful home environment leading to impaired health and development and poorer wellbeing (see The [Continuum of Children's Needs](#)).
- Parents/carers who are targeted by people who wish to gain access to children for the purpose of sexually abusing them, (see SPB Jersey [Recognising Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation, Sexual Abuse, Child Sexual Exploitation, Harmful Sexual Behaviours](#).)
- Parents who are vulnerable adults themselves who are at risk of being exploited by other people, financially abused or being in a domestically abusive relationship (see SPB Jersey [Domestic Abuse](#)).
- Parents/carers who have limited understanding of pregnancy, childbirth, and caring for an infant, (See [Multi-Agency Pre-Birth Protocol for Unborn Babies](#)).

In most cases it is additional stressors (see Introduction), when combined with a parent's learning disability, which lead to concerns about the care child/ren (including the unborn child) and young people are receiving.

Support must be based on respect, recognise human rights, emotional bonds, and made available: -

- From pre-birth.
- On an ongoing basis and where required at every stage of their child(ren)'s development considering wellbeing, health and development and welfare needs.
- For the whole family where required.
- With the aim parents feel in control and experience feeling competent.
- Focus on building strengths.
- In the context of their own extended families, neighbourhoods and communities.

See [The Continuum of Children's Needs](#) – as guidance to help practitioners identify a child's level of need and how to respond appropriately.

#### 4. Actions

Where child(ren) (including the unborn child) or young person is recognised to have wellbeing need any professional can start a [JCF Early Help Assessment](#) with consent from the family.

Where a child (including an unborn child) or young person presents with a health or development need) or where there is a safeguarding Need (see Statutory Guidance – [Levels of Need](#)) practitioners must:-

- Where there is immediate risk of harm, call the police on 999.
- Follow the [SPB Child Protection Procedures, the SPB Children and Young People Safeguarding Referrals Procedure](#)
- Refer to the [Children and Families Hub](#).

- In parallel refer an adult or young person with their consent to supportive domestic abuse services, if domestic abuse is a feature of concern for the adult or child, (see SPB Jersey [Domestic Abuse](#)).
- Where a child may have been physically or emotionally abused, suffered neglect or sexual abuse (see [Recognising Abuse, Neglect and exploitation](#)), consideration must be given to following the [Child Protection Medical Pathway and/or the Child Sexual Abuse Pathway](#).
- Where a parent is also an adult who may be at risk of significant harm practitioners must raise a safeguarding concern with referral to the [Single Point of Referral](#), (see [SPB Jersey Multi-Agency Adult Procedures](#))

## 5. Assessment

Early intervention and advocacy is crucial and protective and provides a range of benefits for parents ([Booth and Booth, 2003](#)). It allows for the strengths and needs of parents to be considered as soon as practicably possible, providing an opportunity to work together with parents before their children suffer, or they become subject to child protection procedure.

Following the principles which underpin effective [working together](#) responses must be child centred, collaborative with colleagues in the multi-agency team (including both children and adult services), where effective communication and co-ordinated responses bring consistency in care.

Keeping the child's needs paramount, a multi-disciplinary Assessment must be made to understand a parent's care and support needs, to help form a child centred needs Assessment.

A multi-agency of services led by children's social care must undertake an Assessment using the JCF [Assessment Framework](#) (see SPB Jersey [Assessment](#)).

The Multi-Disciplinary Team around the child, must include specialist services from Adult Social Care, Learning Disability, Psychological Services and Parenting Services, with a targeted team required to complete a full understanding of need.

**Note** - Historically, IQ testing was used as an assessment method in an attempt to categorise degrees of learning disability. Current multi-disciplinary assessment uses a broader approach to assess a person's strengths and needs.

Assessments must involve capturing and respecting the voice of children, (see SPB Jersey [Respecting and Capturing the Voice of the Child](#)).

**Note** - Where Article 42 Enquiries conclude that there is no actual or likely significant harm it will be important that action is taken to prevent future problems arising (see SPB Jersey [Article 42 Enquiries](#).) It is important to avoid situations where concerns raised remain unaddressed as this leads to poorer outcomes for children. This can happen where there is no statutory right to intervene and parents do not engage with offered support. If parents are unable or are unwilling to engage with support it is important children are re-referred to the [Children and Families HUB](#) for further assessment. A multi-agency [JCF Chronology](#) should be used to capture evidence of support offered and the outcome for the child. Outcomes should be positive, where they are not this gives reason to make further referral.

## 6. Parenting Assessment and Support

Specialist learning disability and other Assessments are essential as a means to understand a parents/carers thoughts and feelings about the support they require, this helps to engage them in support, determine the additional support they require to enable them to care for their child(ren). Assessment also enables parents to understand whether their learning disability is such that it will put their child(ren) at risk of significant harm, impair the wellbeing, health or development, which in turn may be another means of engaging parents/carers with support.

- **Pre-birth support**

It is important to recognise the needs of learning disabled parents/carers at the earliest opportunity. Where possible, a JCF Assessment and support should start when pregnancy is confirmed (see SPB Jersey [Multi-Agency Pre-Birth Protocol for Unborn Babies](#)).

- **Assessing Parenting Capacity**

Commonly used strength-based assessments tools:

- **The Parents Assessment Manual (PAMS):** Where a parent has a learning disability a PAMS assessment provides techniques, and a comprehensive assessment of parenting capacity identifying strengths, as well as areas where further support is needed, by observing parentings undertaking a range of tasks. The length of time taken to complete this is around 12 to 14 weeks.
- **The Graded Care Profile 2 (GCP2) :** is an assessment tool which helps practitioners to take a strength based approach to measuring the quality of care a child is receiving and supports in the identification of neglect, information and more supportive tools can be found here in the [SPB Multi-Child Neglect Strategy](#).
- **Parenting programmes**

Please see the list of Generic Parenting Programmes available on island [here](#).

**Note** - Jersey does not have specific parenting programmes for parents with learning disabilities, they would be completed on a 1:2:1 basis and structured to the parents individual learning needs. programmes can be accessed and tailored to meet the individual needs of parents with learning disabilities.

Key elements required to make a programme suitable for parents with learning disabilities:

- Adapting the pace to suit the needs of all parents.
- Extending the length of the programme, with shorter sessions to avoid overloading the parent with too much information.
- Repetition of tasks and information
- Modelling of behaviour
- Social support

- Providing accessible information in a range of formats, including video and online resources, as well as easy-read and verbal delivery of material (Macintyre and Stewart, 2016)
- **Brighter Futures**

Brighter Futures is a charity that supports parents, carers, children and young people in Jersey. They provide key worker support alongside a number of free programmes and services to help and support parents and carers.

Brighter Futures offers a programme list including Baby Massage, Growing Together and Mellow Parenting Classes. They offer monthly Dad's Club and wellbeing programmes for parents such as relaxation programmes Drawing and Talking and Rest and Repair.

## **7. Accessible information**

Accessible information is crucial to enabling parents with learning disabilities to engage with services and therefore to maximise the chances of their children's needs being met. It is also a legal requirement under the Human Rights (Jersey) Act that parents should be able to participate fully.

Information about universal services must be made available to parents and prospective parents in formats suitable for people with learning disabilities.

This means, for example:

- Easy Read versions of leaflets, letters and other written information, avoiding the use of Jargon.
- Audio and/or visual information on CD/DVD/MP3/YouTube
- Fully accessible websites
- Creating opportunities to tell people with learning disabilities, face-to-face, about services for parents and parents-to-be.
- Word Bans of words that parents can read and understand to be used in written communications.



- Information in bite-size chunks, graphic or other visual information.
- Repeated key messages.
- Time to talk over written information.
- Offer the opportunity, via advocacy, for material and process to be ‘translated.’
- Do not use smaller than a 14-point font in any printed material (Jarrett and colleagues, 2017; Stewart and colleagues, 2016) with Mangal Pro a preferred font.

Parents with a learning disability need to hear the message “it is not unusual to require support with parenting” and that information and communication will be provided in ways accessible to them.

Where meetings are concerned practitioners should offer smaller meetings, with less people, in preparation for larger more formal meetings. Additional time is required to prepare for meetings, agree what will be said, by whom, and how the parent with a learning disability can be best supported to communicate their needs and beliefs, and understand the contributions of others in the meeting.

- **CHANGE** (funded by the Department of Health in 2000) created 3 easy read booklets:
  - You and Your Baby 0 – 1
  - You and Your Little Child 1 – 5
  - My Pregnancy My Choice

Organisations who work with parent (s) (parent (s) to be) who have a Learning Disability should invest in these publications.

**Change** states - key Messages from Parents around practitioners who are good at communication are that they are respectful, they turn up on time, speak directly to them, do not use jargon, listen, do what they say they will do, are honest, a patient and take time.

- **Advocacy support**

Advocates play a crucial role in translating information for parents to enable them to participate more meaningfully in discussions about their children. Independent advocacy and self-advocacy support must be made available at the earliest stage to help parents access and engage with services from the outset. Failure to do so may make it difficult to argue that the parents have been able to participate fully in the process from the start (as is their legal right), or that they have understood what the concerns are and what they needed to do to address those concerns.

This is particularly important during safeguarding and child protection proceedings.

Benefits include:

- Ensuring that the voices of children and parents are heard.
- Supporting the development of trusting relationships.
- Improving relationships between parents and other practitioners.
- Providing representation and support during child protection proceedings.

**Valuing People** recognise *“people with learning disability often have little control over their lives, advocacy services are underdeveloped and people with a Learning Disability are often not central to the planning process around their own lives.”*

Valuing People was published in 2001, with follow up to this with **“Valuing People now”** (2009/2010) which recognised that more needs to be done to ensure that parents with learning disabilities receive support and benefit from all mainstream initiatives aimed at all parents. This includes access to advocacy support and to information and advice.

- **Working Together Parents Network (WTPN)**

WTPN has updated **Good Practice Guidance on working with parents with a Learning Disability** (2021) identifies the following :-

- Self-directed learning can bring about long-term improvement in parenting skills.
- Group education combined with home-based intervention is more effective than either home-based intervention or a group education programme on its own.
- Parents with learning disabilities value both advocacy services and those which support self-advocacy.
- Good co-ordination and communication between children's and adult services is key to effective interventions.
- Preventative approaches are key to safeguarding and promoting children's welfare.
- Interventions should build on parents' strengths as well as addressing their vulnerabilities.
- Interventions should be based on performance rather than knowledge and should incorporate modelling, practice, feedback and praise.
- Tangible rewards may promote attendance at programmes, rapid acquisition of skills and short-term commitment.
- Intensive service engagement is more effective than intermittent service engagement.
- Programmes should be adapted to the actual environment in which the skills are needed in order to enable parents to generalise their learning.
- Teaching should be in the home if possible and if not, in as home-like an environment as possible.
- Factors in the family's environment which promote children's resilience should be identified and enhanced.
- The importance of family ties (for most – though not all – parents and their children) should be recognised and no actions taken that damage such ties.
- Interventions should increase the family's experience of social inclusion rather than cause or contribute to their social exclusion.

Where their easy read booklet for parents can be accessed [here](#).

## 8. Supervision

Practitioners should have access to regular [Internal agency safeguarding supervision](#).

Agencies should also consider multi-agency reflective supervision where cases are complex, stuck or drifting.

## 9. Resolving Professional Difference/Escalation

Professional challenge should be welcomed and partnership working depends on resolving professional difference and conflict as soon as possible. Where staff experience professional differences, they must follow the [SPB Resolving Professional Difference/Escalation Policy](#).

## 10. Issues

- [Falling through the gaps between adult and children's services](#)

If services fail to work together or coordinate effectively, the children of parents with a learning disability are at risk of falling through the gap between the provision of services for children and the provision of services for adults. As a result, some children and parents may not be offered the support of the services that they need to prevent problems from arising.

- [Long term support](#)

As a learning disability is a lifelong diagnosis, parents may need long-term support, which will need to flex and adapt as the developmental needs of a child changes as they grow. Assessments must therefore be re-considered for the child as they develop throughout childhood and will need to be re-evaluate if the child's circumstances change.

- [Young Carers](#)

A young carer is someone under 18 who helps look after someone in their family, or a friend, who is ill, disabled or uses substances. Consideration should therefore be given to children and young people who are carers and information on how to access support can be found [here](#). A referral to the local Young Carers Support Group may be appropriate.

## **Further Information**

[Disability Strategy for Jersey – Working to ensure that people living with disability enjoy a good quality of life](#)

[Iriss - Parents with learning disabilities Steward and McIntyre 2017](#)

[Mencap](#)

[Supporting parents who have learning disabilities: Strategic Briefing \(2018\)](#)

[Supporting Parents with Learning disability through the Child Protection System \(2017\)](#)

[Good Practice Guidance on Working with Parents with a Learning Disability \(DoH/DfES, 2007\) & Updated 2021](#)

[Working Together to Safeguard Children July 2018 \(updated 2022\)](#)

[Valuing People – A New Strategy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century](#)

## **Amendments to Chapters**

This chapter was updated in April 2024 to include the Children and Young People’s Jersey Law 2022, commensurate Statutory Guidance, the Jersey Children’s First Framework and The Continuum of Children’s Needs. This chapter is updated with thanks to London, Dorset and Teesside Safeguarding Partnership Boards where the Chapter has been updated in total, focused on Children of Parents with Learning Disabilities and parental parenting capacity.