**West Sussex – Practice Guidance**

IROs are qualified social workers with at least five years’ experience, and who have acquired the right skills to carry out this role.

**Working with Parents with a Learning Disability**

In April 2018 Lord James Mumby, President of the Family Division issues **James** issued [guidance](https://www.judiciary.uk/publications/family-proceedings-parents-with-a-learning-disability/) in relation to working with Parents with Learning Disability. He was clear in his expectation that his *“guidance was to bring to the attention of practitioners and judges, and to commend for careful consideration and application by everyone, the very important:* [*Good practice guidance on working with Parents with a Learning Disability*](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/sps/documents/wtpn/2016%20WTPN%20UPDATE%20OF%20THE%20GPG%20-%20finalised%20with%20cover.pdf) *issued by the Working Together with Parents Network and the Norah Fry Centre in September 2016.*”

**Key passages from the Department of Health and Department for Education and Skills*, Good Practice Guidance on Working with Parents with a Learning Disability*. (updated September 2016) are below:**

* Services in contact with parents with learning disabilities should use appropriate assessment materials and resources and/or access specialist expertise. Failing to do so will result in the parent receiving an unfair and therefore invalid assessment, in breach of their legal rights.
* Where a parent has a learning disability it will be important not to make assumptions about their parental capacity. Having a learning disability does not mean that a person cannot learn new skills.
* Learning disabled parents may need support to develop the understanding, resources, skills, experience and confidence to meet the needs of their children.
* Many parents with learning disabilities are understandably very worried that their children may be taken away from them. This fear can create real barriers in establishing the relationship necessary to carry out a good assessment. Consideration should be given as to who is the best person to carry out an assessment and/or what specialist expertise may need to be sought.
* Adult learning disability services should ensure that Person Centred Planning is made available to parents with learning disabilities as part of both the assessment of their needs and the planned response to these needs. Person Centred Planning is a process of life planning which enables the identification of a person’s strengths, needs, relationships and the barriers they face.
* The guidance confirms the importance of appropriate and proportionate assessment and the need for assessors to be appropriately trained and with the experience and knowledge necessary to carry out the assessment.
* Assessors should be sensitive to the stigma attached to a learning disability label. Every effort should be made to frame the issue as one of identifying particular support needs.
* Out-of-home assessments should be avoided if at all possible, unless the home environment is disempowering to the parent.
* Support to develop and enhance parenting skills should be suited to the parent’s learning needs and circumstances. Support should be based on, and adapted to, the learning needs of parents. For example, if parents with learning disabilities are to benefit from parenting education programmes – whether run in a mainstream or specialist setting – such programmes will need to be adapted to meet the particular learning needs of the parents concerned (and this, indeed, is a requirement under the Equality Act 2010).
* In the case of parent support services, an assessment of a parent’s learning needs and circumstances should inform the support provided to develop parenting skills. Research indicates that – for parents with learning disabilities – the key elements of successful parenting skills support are: Clear communication, and ensuring parents have understood what they are told Use of role-play, modelling, and videoing parent and professional undertaking a task together, for discussion, comparison and reflection Step by step pictures showing how to undertake a task Repeating topics regularly and offering opportunities for frequent practice Providing/developing personalised “props”: for example, finding a container which will hold the right amount of milk for the child so that the parent does not have to measure out the milk.
* Where a number of different agencies are involved in supporting families affected by parental learning disability, a consistent and co-ordinated approach should be taken to the aims and objectives to be achieved. Parents with learning disabilities are often in contact with a range of different organisations and professionals, and in these circumstances sometimes receive conflicting messages about what they should be aiming for. A lack of consistency and co-ordination confuses parents and places them at an unnecessary disadvantage.
* Parents may need emotional support. Parents with learning disabilities may have low self-esteem and lack confidence because of previous life experiences. They may therefore need support to build their confidence. Parents may particularly need emotional support when children’s social care become involved because of concerns about children’s welfare. Fear that children are going to be taken away can make it harder for parents to respond positively to assessments and interventions. In such circumstances, parents need support from someone who they feel is “on their side” and who can help them positively engage with services. Such support is often provided by adult learning disability services, and by independent sector services and advocates.
* A need for long-term support does not mean that parents cannot look after their children. Some parents with learning disabilities will only need short-term support, such as help with looking after a new baby or learning about child development and childcare tasks. Others, however, will need on-going support. Most may need support at various different points of their family’s life cycle for two main reasons. Firstly, although a parent with learning disabilities can learn how to do things, their cognitive impairment will not go away. Just as someone with a physical impairment may need personal assistance for the rest of their life so a person with learning disabilities may need assistance with daily living, particularly as new situations arise. Secondly, children and their needs change. A parent may have learned to look after a baby and young child and be coping well. However, as the child enters adolescence other support needs may arise.
* It will be important that every effort is made to ensure that independent advocates are those who have the necessary skills and expertise concerning both learning disability and child protection. When children are placed in foster care, parents should receive practical support to maximise their chances of improving their parenting capacity. Without this, parents will have little chance of reunification with children who have been removed from their care. Parents are likely to have strong reactions to separation from their children (particularly when it triggers feelings from previous experiences of loss). They will need help with these painful emotions in order that their reactions do not unnecessarily jeopardise their chances of reunification with their children.Local authorities should make reasonable adjustments to procedures in relation to care proceedings in order to avoid discrimination against parents with learning disabilities. One key issue for parents with learning disabilities involved in court proceedings is their need for enough time to understand what is going on, to be fully involved in any assessments and care planning, and to have the chance to learn and demonstrate improved parenting capacity.

Reference Points:

One Min Guide: The West Sussex Learning Disabilities Parenting Service

Booklet designed for parents with Learning Disabilities explaining child protection and court processes:

