

# The Child with <sup>10</sup> General Learning Disability

Factsheet for parents and teachers

## What is meant by generalized or global learning disability?

*Learning disability used to be known as intellectual 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 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.

<http://www.trippin.co.nz>



## 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.

## 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 should 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. 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

## 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.

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, Group Special Education should prepare a **Individual Educational Plan (IEP)**. 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.

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.

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