

Involving parents in assessment and decision-making

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Briefing

Key messages

- Quality of the relationship between the practitioner and parents is central to effective engagement and involvement of parents.
- Parents value honesty, reliability, good listening skills and practitioners who demonstrate empathy and warmth.
- Make explicit use of counselling skills (both generic and adapted to parents with learning difficulties) to develop empathy and increase the potential for more productive relations.
- Power differentials should be recognised and taken into account especially when working with resistance.
- Explicit discussion with parents of their perceptions of how workers are using their professional power as a means of control or as an element in the support.
- Holistic, strengths-based assessment, including family and social networks and methods such as family group conferences can be effective especially in involving fathers and father-figures.
- Drawing on the expertise of professionals with experience of working with adults with learning disabilities to maximise their involvement and participation.

Introduction

Engaging and involving services users is at the forefront of public service policy across the UK and is embodied, for social work in Scotland, in the *Changing Lives*¹ agenda. Working collaboratively with parents is a longstanding concept in child and family social work and is reflected in the prominence given to working in partnership with parents in child welfare policy and practice since the early 1990s².

This research briefing draws on research that explores the perceptions and experiences of parents involved with child welfare services to highlight some of the key messages for practice that enhance participation. We have primarily focused on contexts where the exercise of power is most immediately evident. Parental experiences of child protection processes are therefore foregrounded. Particular attention is drawn to the experience of parents with a learning disability because of the additional disadvantage they experience through limitations in professional knowledge and the discrimination that characterises many areas of their lives. Despite a relatively substantial body of research on parents' experience of participation in assessment and decision-making there is less on specific practice mechanisms to facilitate engagement³. Parental involvement is set in a context of at times conflicting interests between child welfare and parental rights, and where the power differentials favour agencies and professionals^{4,5}.

Why is this issue important?

There is evidence to suggest that involving parents, where there are child protection concerns, leads to better outcomes for children, improved family assessments and more focused social work practice^{5,6}. The 'Getting it Right for Every Child' policy initiative points to the centrality of involving children, young people and their families in assessment⁷. Guidance for looked after children⁸ and National Child Protection Guidance⁹ reinforce parental participation. The latter guidance emphasises the importance of considering the precise communication needs of parents with learning disabilities and the potential requirement for independent advocacy is specifically recognised. This reflects the growing numbers of people with learning disabilities who are parents (1:15 people with a learning disability¹⁰). There is evidence to demonstrate they are overrepresented in child protection and legal proceedings^{11,12}. *The same as you?* report¹³ highlights the importance of inter-agency co-ordination to support adults with learning disabilities in their right to choose to be parents. Legislation underpins the principle of partnership to support parents in caring for their children and reinforces the importance of parental involvement in decisions about looked after children. Children's hearings can be seen to represent the community, professionals and families working together to make decisions in the child's best interests (Children (Scotland) Act 1995). The Human Rights Act 1998 reinforces good practice principles of transparency and proportionality in decision-making when intervening in the lives of families (Article 8 European Convention on Human Rights, right to respect for private and family life).

What does the research tell us?

Parents may feel disempowered and marginalised in formal decision-making arenas. They can form the impression that decisions have already been made and that there is little scope for influencing them. This resonates particularly in child protection proceedings and those involving parents with learning disabilities^{4,14,15,16}. The quality of the relationship between family and practitioners appears to be central to parental involvement in child protection processes⁵. Parents value honesty, fairness, reliability and demonstrations of concern and sensitivity for them as individuals and for their viewpoints^{5,6,14,15,17}. Explicit discussions of parental perception of professionals' use of power to support or control can be influential³⁴. The use of clear assessment frameworks, encompassing an ecological perspective and fully shared with parents, provides transparency about the process of assessment and in turn may serve to promote increased parental involvement¹⁸.

Developing communication and empathic skills, especially in responding constructively to parental anxiety, anger and at times hostility, are important. More empathic styles of communication may lead to improved information disclosure and co-operation compared to more interrogatory approaches when child welfare concerns are present¹⁹. Professionals need to better understand that some of the strategies parents with learning disabilities deploy to avoid or resist engagement, such as concealing pregnancies or refusing support, may represent long experience of oppressive societal attitudes rather

Implications for practice

- Parents need information about assessment and decision-making processes to be communicated effectively to them in ways that they understand.
- Consideration should be given to involving another professional trusted by parents especially where there are high levels of anxiety or hostility.
- Involving independent advocates and specialist workers should be routinely considered for parents with a learning disability.
- Avoid over reliance on verbal communication skills for parents with a learning disability. Concrete methods of communication, the use of symbols and repetition promote understanding.
- Using empathic communication skills may increase the probability of more productive engagement.

than inability to parent^{20,21}. In decision-making fora, changing expected roles in the communication process, such as allowing parents to speak first, is suggested as a potentially effective technique²². Family Group Conferences provide an alternative option for family involvement based on negotiation, especially in increasing the involvement of men²³ given the recognised lack of focus on fathers in assessment processes^{24,25}.

Straightforward language that is clear about child welfare concerns and the operation of formal processes is valued by parents¹⁵. Assessment often relies on verbal questioning and this may disadvantage parents especially, but not exclusively, those with a learning disability^{16,25}. Efforts should be made to involve adult/specialist services in assessment with parents with learning disabilities as evidence suggests practitioners frequently do not have relevant skills or fail to make use of tailored packages and manuals which point to the effectiveness of simple language, concrete tasks, repetition and reinforcement^{26,27,28}. Easy-read documents and use of symbols and pictures can be particularly useful for effective communication with these parents¹⁶. Interpreters may facilitate participation and contribute to reducing language barriers for parents where English is a second language. However, studies point to some of the limitations in using interpreters that sit alongside the importance of effective training for practitioners in their use. These include issues of confidentiality (some minority ethnic families may prefer an interpreter outside their community and social networks), competence on the part of the interpreter in dealing with concepts around child abuse, errors, lack of neutrality and allowing sufficient time. All may impact on the dynamics of meetings^{29,30,31}.

The presence of a supporter and/or an independent advocate can serve to redress power imbalances and facilitate participation for all parents including those with a learning

disability by explaining documents, preparing responses, attendance at meetings to support and represent views, interpreting decisions^{22,29,32,33}. For parents with learning disabilities this may best be an independent advocate. In addition, where there are concerns about aggression or hostility, co-working with another professional practitioner who has already built a trusted relationship with a parent can be beneficial²⁵.

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Further resources

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 Family Rights Group with Roskill, C, Featherstone, B, Ashley, A and Haresnape, S (2008) *Fathers Matter Volume 2: Further findings on fathers and their involvement with social care services* London: Family Rights Group

CHANGE – Working together with Parents Network (www.right-support.org.uk) an organisation run for and by parents with a learning disability
 Australian Supported Parenting Consortium, practical guides www.healthystart.net.au/resources/cat_view/6-practical-tools-to-use-with-parents
 Scottish Consortium for Learning Disabilities (2009) Scottish Good Practice Guidelines for Supporting Parents with Learning Disabilities, www.sclد.org.uk/sclد-projects/working-with-parents/parenting-guidelines

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About this briefing

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