Delivering psychological services for children, young people with learning disabilities and their families
The term learning disabilities is used to describe those children and young people with significant impairment of intelligence (IQ score of less than 70) and social functioning with onset in the developmental phase. Some learning disabilities have an identifiable cause, for example a genetic condition such as Down’s syndrome, which may be recognised at birth. However, often recognition comes with delayed/disordered development as the child or young person matures.

Children and young people with learning disabilities present with a wide spectrum of health, social, psychological and educational needs ranging from those with very substantial physical, cognitive and communication impairments who are totally dependent on others for all aspects of care, to those with milder impairments.

Across the range, there is tremendous variation of developmental strengths and weaknesses in the individual child, who may have some good areas of development, such as physical and motor skills and mostly robust health, yet some very special health needs associated with epilepsy, behavioural and mental health problems.

Traditionally, reported figures have given 2 per cent as the number of people with mild learning disabilities, and 0.5 per cent for those with more severe learning disabilities. Recent figures indicate increases in the prevalence of children and young people with Complex Learning Difficulties and Disabilities.

Children and young people with learning disabilities experience significant health and social inequalities with higher rates of mental and physical health issues, emotional and behavioural difficulties, increased experience of poverty, social isolation and bullying. They may be seen in a variety of universal and specialist settings across education, health, social services and the voluntary and community sector. They are over-represented in vulnerable populations such as neglected, abused and Looked After Children, Youth Justice and complex mental health.

Health and social inequalities are further compounded – when learning disabilities are not recognised, then education, health or social interventions cannot be adapted to be appropriate and effective; learning disabilities are also still an exclusion criteria for services, innovation and/or research.
The role of clinical psychologists

Clinical psychologists working in this area embrace a rich and diverse application of psychological knowledge and skills. This includes psychological, environmental, interpersonal and social issues. Psychological approaches are particularly necessary for children and young people with learning disabilities which are primarily developmental/psychological conditions.

Clinical psychologists may contribute by working individually with a child or young person, for example to help them to develop strategies to better manage their anxiety or anger. In addition, clinical psychologists would usually also be involved with the system around the child or young person – families, staff, networks, services and communities – to enable them to better support them.
Psychology is applied across multiple levels; assessments and interventions need to be creatively adapted and individualised using the psychological evidence base. An important framework that guides assessment and intervention is the Positive Behaviour Support framework, this considers both the skills that a child or young person needs to develop (for example anxiety management skills) and the changes that can be made to the environment to support the child or young person (for example the provision of visual information so that they are better able to anticipate what is going to happen and so feel less anxious).

The Positive Behaviour Support framework combines both Applied Behaviour Analysis, and other evidenced-based approaches, with a values-led approach that highlights the importance of person-centred work and a focus on improving a child or young person’s quality of life by building their skills. Collecting, analysing and reporting routine feedback and outcome measures across different levels and sharing and learning from them is vital. Clinical psychologists play a substantial role in training, consulting with, supervising and co-working with a range of staff and families/carers.
Summary

A good psychological service for children and young people with learning disabilities, their families and networks means that services will:

- Cover the whole age range from 0–18/25 years across a range of levels and layers of complexity.
- Offer evidence-based/evidence-informed psychological approaches using a developmental/contextual bio-psycho-social frame, with robust access to Positive Behaviour Support, for a range of interventions – groups, individuals, protocols, staff training/supervision, intensive work and encourages innovation and research.
- Provide early intervention (or know how to access this).
- Is part of a local approach to managing crisis (or know how to access this).
- Collect routine feedback and outcome measures, sharing and learning from them.
- Is integrated with local social care, education and voluntary sector services and parent groups.
- Work across home, school and clinical settings.
- Link across various health provisions – Child Development Centres, Paediatrics, CAMHS, ensuring that the children and young people with learning disabilities have access to appropriate physical and mental health care.
- Have strong relationships with Commissioners who recognise strengths of psychology to provide not just direct clinical services, but teaching, training, consultation and support to others, and commission for this.
- Maintain an appropriate grade structure to cover all levels of input and complexity, local and national workforce and service development and review.
We would recommend that this leaflet is read in conjunction with other leaflets in the series and in particular with *Clinical and applied psychologists in child and adolescent mental health*.

This leaflet summarises a chapter in *What Good Looks Like in Psychological Services for Children, Young People and their Families*. Electronic copies can be downloaded for free from: http://shop.bps.org.uk/publications/child-and-family-clinical-psychology-review-no-3-summer-2015.html

**Hard copies** can be requested for free from Helen Barnett, British Psychological Society: Helen.Barnett@bps.org.uk

If you would like to discuss any of the information in this brochure further, please contact: dcpchildlead@bps.org.uk