

# Providing the right support?

An evaluation of the North East Parent Support (NEPS) service and the Walsall Parents' Advocacy service.

An increasing number of advocacy services for adults with learning disabilities are supporting parents with learning disabilities during child protection proceedings. The advocates are attempting to ensure parents' voices are heard during proceedings which parents often do not understand and find very threatening and upsetting.

This executive summary presents the key findings from an evaluation of two Mencap advocacy services specifically supporting parents with learning disabilities to understand and have their voice heard during child protection proceedings. It discusses the support needed by advocacy services working in this legally and emotionally complex area.

## Key Findings

- The services were enabling parents with learning disabilities to understand the child protection system and have their voices heard. Parents believed they understood what was happening, were more able to speak up for themselves and were treated with more respect when supported by an advocate. Parents also felt they were supported emotionally and practically by the services.
- The advocates, who had experience in child protection, were respected by child protection workers for their realistic understanding of the child protection system.
- The advocates were modelling good practice in working with parents with learning disabilities and challenging the practice of some local professionals.
- The services were advocating for adults with learning disabilities while also working in line with guidance for advocates supporting parents in child protection. Services should relate to both advocacy standards relevant to working with adults with learning disabilities and The Protocol on Advice and Advocacy for Parents (child protection) (Lindley and Richards 2002).
- Advocates working in this complex area should be supported through clear protocols regarding child protection and the protection of vulnerable adults, regular expert clinical supervision, appropriate training around advocacy and child protection, and supportive links with similar advocacy organisations.
- Parents and professionals believed that all parents with learning disabilities involved in child protection should be supported by an advocate.



## **Background**

The number of parents with learning disabilities is believed to be growing although estimates regarding the actual number of parents in the UK vary widely. McGaw (1997) estimated that there might be 250,000 parents with learning disabilities known to health and social care agencies while other estimates have been lower (Booth and Booth 2004). The most recent figures, from the first national survey of adults with learning disabilities in England found that one in 15 of the 2,898 adults interviewed had children (Emerson et al, 2005).

Parents with learning disabilities are very likely to have their children removed from them. Again estimates vary, but Emerson et al's study found that 40% of parents with learning disabilities were not living with their children. Booth et al (2005b) found that in one local authority, approximately one sixth of care proceedings involved at least one parent with learning disabilities and in three quarters of these cases the children were removed. Cleaver and Nicholson (2005) however, found that in less than twenty percent of cases involving parents with learning disabilities, across 10 authorities, were the children permanently removed and that most were fostered rather than being adopted.

The role of the advocate is therefore of paramount importance in ensuring that the voices of parents with learning disabilities are heard within the child protection system. Indeed some researchers have described the child protection system as something that 'systematically abuses' parents with learning disabilities (Booth 1998a, Booth 1998b). The difficulties with the child protection system have been reported as including parents' lack of understanding of the system, that parents may be judged by stricter criteria than other parents and that the evidence used against them may not be the same as that used against other parents. Parents with learning disabilities are also less likely to have received support with their parenting or if support has been provided, they are more likely to be blamed for the failure of support rather than inappropriate services (Booth and Booth, 2004, Booth et al, 2005a and b, McConnell and Llewellyn, 2000).

This executive summary presents the key findings from an evaluation of two Mencap advocacy services specifically supporting parents with learning disabilities to understand and have their voices heard during child protection proceedings. It discusses the support needed by advocacy services working in this legally and emotionally complex area.

## **The advocacy services**

The Walsall Parents' Advocacy Service was established in 2004 with the remit of supporting parents with learning disabilities during child protection and legal proceedings in the Walsall area. The North East Parent Support (NEPS) Service was established in 2003 initially with the wider remit of supporting parents with learning disabilities more generally and identifying parents' most pressing support needs. More recently, this service has focused on supporting parents in child protection proceedings, in response to an increase in referrals from parents involved in the child protection system. It covers a large geographical area including nine local authorities. Both the services were provided and managed by full-time advocates who both had previous experience in child protection. In Walsall, a part-time support worker was also employed and in the North East a part-time administrator was employed. A small number of volunteers also provide emotional and practical support to parents in the North East.

## **The evaluation methods**

The study involved a review of current national policy and practice frameworks relevant to supporting and advocating for/with parents with learning disabilities. Positive practice in providing

advocacy support to parents with a learning disability was also investigated through contact with two national advocacy organisations and five advocacy projects specifically supporting parents with learning disabilities.

The services were evaluated through interviews with parents and professionals involved with their case, through discussions and interviews with advocacy staff and analysis of parents' files (with permission). Nine interviews with parents (including two couples) and 15 interviews with external professionals were undertaken in Walsall. In the North East, five interviews with parents and 13 with external professionals were undertaken. Interviews were also carried out with two workers from the Mencap Community Support Service (providing in-home support to parents with learning disabilities) and one volunteer.

The study drew on the researcher's experience in mapping the support available to parents with learning disabilities around the UK (Tarleton et al 2006) and the advice of a group of parents with learning disabilities who had been involved in child protection proceedings.

## **The services provided**

Both the Walsall and NEPS services provided **one-to-one support** to parents with learning disabilities in order to prepare for, attend, understand and contribute to child protection meetings and court proceedings. This support included supporting parents to understand, often very complicated, detailed and lengthy reports regarding their parenting, and to formulate and present their views. The advocates also supported parents to attend meetings with solicitors and to attend any additional assessments as required by the court.

**Practical and emotional support** was provided by a part-time worker in Walsall and a small number of volunteers in the North East. In both services the part-time support worker or volunteers met with parents regularly and supported them to overcome issues (such as inappropriate housing), to access community facilities and to share their feelings about their often traumatic experiences. In Walsall, the support worker had worked with a family to establish the support they needed in order to avoid their re-entry into the child protection system.

In Walsall, practical and emotional support was also provided via a parent support group which was seeking to become independent from the service with parents taking up key roles in the development and management of the group. The group was facilitated by the support worker and enabled parents to share their experiences and gain practical information from invited speakers. However, there was some lack of clarity regarding the remit of the group. Issues that may need to be addressed include whether parents who were not involved in child protection could be included, the development of relationships between parents about whom there are child protection concerns when children were still in the family home and whether parents, who were often monitored by the same child protection professionals, were keeping information shared in the group confidential.

Both services were actively providing **advice and support for other organisations**. In the North East, the advocate was actively supporting a local advocacy service working with parents with learning disabilities in child protection and ensuring local professionals adhered to the protocol for including parents with learning disabilities in child protection. In Walsall, good practice had been modelled for workers responsible for assessing parents with learning disabilities at a local family centre; this included the use of easy information and how to discuss issues with parents at the appropriate level. The advocate in Walsall has also undertaken consultancy work to develop best practice in supporting parents with learning disabilities in the local authority.

In both services, workers were responding positively to the many complex challenges inherent in supporting parents with learning disabilities during a very emotional, confusing and upsetting time. These challenges included the issue of providing emotional input to parents who often have few social supports. Parents may see workers as 'friends' and may have a tendency to become dependent on workers who ultimately have a responsibility to protect their children as well as support and empower them to be as independent as possible.

## **The impact of services**

**The Walsall Parents Advocacy Service and the NEPS Services** had a number of positive impacts in relation to the way parents were treated and local professionals' practice.

**Advocacy for parents was recognised as 'vital'** in Walsall and Newcastle. Wider recognition, in the North East, of the importance of the advocate's role was inhibited by local perspectives and geography/time available.

**Parents were treated with more respect** by professionals involved in child protection procedures. Parents felt that there was more 'balance in the room' when they were supported by an advocate and that professionals were more 'careful' about how they spoke about and to parents. Professionals, in Walsall particularly, recognised that their focus was completely on the child and they often neglected parents' views. The advocate's role was seen as reminding them to treat parents with appropriate dignity and respect.

**Parents' voices were heard.** Parents were supported to speak for themselves, with support from the advocate, who made the professionals aware that the parent would like to contribute. Parents also requested that the advocate spoke for them. The parents recognised that 'inappropriate responses' (ie anger and aggression) during meetings discussing their parenting 'made matters worse'.

**Parents were emotionally supported** by their advocate who could read their body language and recognise when they needed a break from meetings. Parents felt that they could phone their advocate for support when they needed it and that they were provided with on-going support through attendance at the parent support group, in Walsall, and by the support worker in Walsall and the volunteers in the North East.

**Advocacy workers challenged local professionals' practice.** Parents were pleased that their advocate had experience in child protection and 'knew the system' and were aware when the child protection system was not being executed appropriately. The advocates were reported as challenging professionals appropriately. In Newcastle, the advocate was praised for challenging professionals to adhere to the local protocol regarding involving parents in child protection.

In Walsall, workers involved in assessing parents' support needs were supported to develop their practice through advice from the advocate and support worker. At a more strategic level, the advocate and support worker were involved in strategy development around parents. However, child protection workers who were focused on the needs of the child had not changed their practice regarding parents, but were reassured that parents were included more appropriately in the child protection context by the presence of the advocate.

**Services' professionalism respected.** The advocates were perceived as having a clear stance regarding child protection and the protection of vulnerable adults and as interacting appropriately with professionals whilst maintaining parents' confidences. Parents and professionals were clear that advocates would report issues if the parents could not be encouraged to discuss the issues themselves. The advocates' child protection experience was regarded as enabling them to have

a realistic understanding of the situation for parents and to convey messages appropriately to parents without 'creating false hope'.

**Positive relationships with parents.** The advocates, support worker in Walsall and volunteer in the North East were reported to have extremely positive relationships with parents which were contained within appropriate boundaries.

## **Type of advocacy being provided**

The advocacy services were providing a form of specialist advocacy for parents with learning disabilities involved in child protection proceedings. The services used strategies to support parents' understanding and involvement in accordance with advocacy services for adults with learning disabilities (Action for Advocacy 2006). They were also working in line with the Protocol on Advice and Advocacy for Parents (child protection) (Lindley and Richards 2002). This protocol, for advocates supporting any parent involved in child protection proceedings, requires advocates to:

- Be experienced in child protection and to be able to advise parents regarding the process.
- Have credibility with the local authority whilst empowering parents.
- Clarify concerns about the child and how these can be resolved to the satisfaction of the local authority.
- Negotiate with the local authority on the parents' behalf.
- Encourage parents to work with the local authority, when appropriate. (Parents failure to engage with children's services can be seen as further evidence of their inappropriate parenting. In many instances parents are expected to comply with the support provided or orders made whilst involved in child protection).
- Identify when legal advice should be sought.

The advocates had a professional focus and fulltime role supporting parents with learning disabilities which drew specifically on their child protection experience as well as their experience of working with adults with learning disabilities. This model of provision differs from some other advocacy services supporting parents with learning disabilities in child protection, whose focus is more on ensuring advocates have a background in advocacy and in working with adults with learning disabilities.

## **Advocacy services supporting parents with learning disabilities during child protection – key issues to consider**

The results of this evaluation suggest that advocacy services supporting parents with learning disabilities during child protection may wish to consider the following key issues:

- Advocates should be employed who have experience of advocacy for adults with learning disabilities and experience of child protection. Supporting parents during child protection is not considered an appropriate role for citizen advocates.
- Advocates should have caseloads of no more than 10 parents.
- Where possible, an advocacy service's remit should be limited to one local authority to reduce travelling time and the difficulties of working within numerous sets of child protection procedures.

- Regular project supervision, regular expert clinical supervision relating to child protection and links with other advocacy organisations supporting parents during child protection should be an integral part of the service.
- Services should have appropriate policies regarding child protection and the protection of vulnerable adults.
- Services should employ more than one advocate per service so that advocates have informal advice and emotional support regarding their case load and support is available regarding risk taking and lone working.
- Services should comply with relevant advocacy principles around supporting adults with learning disabilities and advocates should be provided with relevant advocacy training.
- Services should comply with the protocol by Lindley and Richards (2002) and advocates should be provided with the training suggested regarding the complexities of the child protection system.
- The independence of parents' advocacy services should be supported through strong contractual agreements which ensure impartiality. This is particularly important when the service is funded by a local authority. Advocacy services supporting parents with learning disabilities should also be separate from other services supporting parents with learning disabilities, such as services providing in-home support.



## References

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## More information

Further copies of this summary of key findings can be viewed or downloaded at:-

[www.bristol.ac.uk/norahfry](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/norahfry)

[www.mencap.org.uk](http://www.mencap.org.uk)

A Plain Facts summarising the findings from the project most relevant to adults with learning disabilities will also be available from the Mencap website in due course.

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