



Head Start

Promoting Positive Mental Health for
Children and Young People
with a Learning Disability

**A guide for Parents, Carers, Educators
and Health and Social Care
Staff**

Dr Lesley-Ann Black
Maurice Devine

Learning Disability and Mental Health

Introduction

Research tells us that children and young people with a learning disability are more vulnerable to developing difficulties with their mental health and emotional well being than their non disabled peers. Children and young people with a learning disability are also more likely to experience greater levels of discrimination, bullying and social exclusion. They may have additional physical disabilities, medical conditions or challenging behaviour. It can also be difficult for them to communicate their needs or to adapt to life changes.

When we talk about mental health and emotional well being we often think about mental ill health, such as depression, schizophrenia and anxiety disorders. However, good mental health is about the ability and opportunity to enjoy life, to deal with disappointment and sadness, and to have a positive sense of well being and self worth.



In order to give children and young people with a learning disability a Head Start, strong and supportive relationships, regular social and leisure opportunities and the chance to experience success and achievement are all important. Therefore this guide is designed to help people who support, care for and educate children and young people with a learning disability take practical steps to maintain the child's emotional health and mental well being. This guide does not address more challenging issues that may require the help of a trained professional. Should you have concerns, or are worried about the mental health of the child or young person, please refer to page 15 for further guidance.



Resilience and Mental Health

It is important for children and young people with a learning disability to develop “resilience” because it is known that children who are resilient have better chances of having good mental health. Being resilient means being able to “bounce back” from difficulties or challenges. People who are resilient can cope and adapt better to stress and challenging life situations. Importantly, resilience is a characteristic that can be taught and learned.

Risk and protective factors

Resilience is influenced by a number of ‘protective’ and ‘risk’ factors. These are personal characteristics or things that occur in our lives that either increase (protective factors) or decrease (risk factors) our chances of being resilient. Below are some examples:

Protective factors:

- having a person to trust and talk to
- family unity and togetherness
- a positive school environment
- participation in the local community
- having good physical health

Risk factors:

- family conflict
- lack of opportunities
- constant criticism or abuse
- poverty
- poor diet/nutrition



The Purpose of this Guide

There are many things that can be done to help improve a child or young person's resilience and subsequently their mental health. This guide will help you build protective factors in the lives of children and young people with a learning disability, develop their resilience, and reduce the likelihood of mental health problems from happening. Below, we have listed a number of key factors to help build resilience. Although each factor is important in itself, they all overlap, interact and reinforce each other.

'Head Start' Protective Factors:

- Good physical health
- Exercise and activity
- Success and achievement
- Self Awareness
- Positive family connections
- Friendships and relationships
- Meaningful social activity
- Support during changes and transitions
- Involved in making choices and decisions
- Care and support

In this guide we will discuss each factor individually and suggest some practical tips and ideas for you to consider.

It is important to acknowledge that the needs of children and young people and their families vary widely. Consequently, some parts of this guide may be more or less relevant to your particular circumstances. However, it is known that the 10 factors identified do have a significant impact on positive emotional well being.





Good Physical Health

Children and young people with a learning disability may encounter a range of difficulties with their physical health such as epilepsy, swallowing difficulties, mobility problems, or dental problems. They may have other health conditions that result in them experiencing pain, which may require regular treatment and medication. If the child or young person has difficulty communicating, they may also have problems letting anyone know that they are in pain. Emotional problems are more likely to develop in people with unrecognised or long standing physical health problems. It is therefore important to ensure children and young people with a learning disability have the best possible state of physical health.



Hints and Tips

- Ensure that the child or young person has a regular medical review, for example, receives a yearly health check from the doctor.
- Try to identify how the child or young person communicates physical pain, discomfort or distress. Ensure that people close to, or who work with the child or young person are made aware of this. Alternative therapies, such as reflexology can be particularly therapeutic for children with learning disabilities.
- If the child or young person is taking regular medication, make yourself aware of the effects and side effects of this. Where appropriate bring this information to relevant medical personnel.
- Try to ensure that the child has a well balanced diet, receives regular and adequate exercise, and has ample time for rest, relaxation and sleep.
- If there are problems around health issues, you can discuss these with local professionals such as a dietician, speech and language therapist or community learning disability nurse. The child or young person may also have a key worker who can help to sign post you to further options.

Physical Activity and Exercise

Exercise enhances positive mental health and emotional well being. Physical activity is known to prevent clinical depression and may also reduce anxiety, enhance positive moods and improve self esteem.

Hints and Tips

- Try to ensure that the child has access to frequent physical activity of at least 30 minutes per day.
- Access local and voluntary organisations in your area. These will provide physical and leisure activities to children and young people with a learning disability.
- Seek advice from physiotherapy staff regarding exercise activities, and any limitations that may be imposed by the child or young person's physical disability. For example, consider chair based activity when mobility is a difficulty. See page 16 for further information.
- Be creative and utilise activities that the child or young person enjoys. Activities such as walking, football, cycling, bowls and dancing are enjoyable and accessible.
- Tailor exercise to the child's condition; for example, many children with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder enjoy swimming; likewise children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder can benefit from high energy activities like trampolining.





Success and Achievement

It is thought that a significant factor that makes children and young people prone to developing emotional problems is the limited opportunities they have to experience feelings of success, achievement and accomplishment. A lack of such experiences can reduce feelings of self-worth, self-esteem, empowerment and ultimately their mental health. Whether the child or young person has mild, moderate or severe learning disabilities, feelings of success and achievement are central to enhancing resilience.

Hints and Tips

- Take every opportunity to talk about successes. Give positive praise and encouragement. Using visible rewards such as medals, or a small toy can help to reinforce the messages you give.
- Acknowledging home life and developmental achievements such as brushing teeth, sharing a toy, or going to the swimming pool for the first time should be recognised and praised.
- In order to enhance the chances of experiencing success and achievement, use the child or young person's strengths. This could be in areas like music, drawing or singing.
- Use photographs to keep reminders of successes or positive moments. Display the work of the child or young person. As children grow older the importance of this is often forgotten.
- Don't be afraid to let them try something and not succeed. This is all part of becoming resilient. Reassure them by giving plenty of "I know you can do it" messages.



Self-Awareness

Children and young people with a learning disability who have some understanding and awareness of themselves and the challenges they face are more likely to have stronger emotional resilience. It is important that from an early age, children and young people are helped to see and regard their learning disability as being only one aspect of themselves. This is about helping to build confidence and enabling them to recognise their strengths as much as their limitations.



Hints and Tips

- Children and young people should be given opportunities to talk about the limitations imposed by their disability. For example, why close supervision is required at times for a child with epilepsy.
- It is important to be open and honest about the disability and to help them understand more about their particular condition. Many organisations provide useful leaflets, videos and DVD's to explain particular conditions and the likely effects on living and lifestyle.
- Group work with peers is one way of helping children and young people understand that everyone is unique and that everyone has their own different limitations.
- Involve the child and young person in activities and pursuits that provide the best match with their abilities. Focus on activities where participation is not going to draw attention to their disability.
- Emphasise and focus your energy on their talents and abilities.



Positive Family Connections

The child or young person with a learning disability may place significant demands upon your time and patience, but may also bring extra rewards, fun and affection into your life. It may also be more difficult to communicate with the child or young person or to manage their behaviour. Parents and siblings have a very important part to play in providing the love, understanding and consistency that the child or young person needs.



People who take an interest, who listen, who care and love us, make us feel better. Secure attachments underpin the physical and emotional ties that support and sustain us as we get older. Positive family connections are about providing a warm, secure home life, helping the child or young person to learn the rules of life (such as how to share, respecting others) and to develop good self-esteem.

Hints and Tips

- In life's busyness, plan and make time together. This reduces feelings of isolation. Make time to have a family night in and regularly sit down as a family at mealtimes.
- Communication is key: talk through issues, be as honest as possible. Listening to children will make them feel their opinions are valued.
- Encourage the child or young person to become involved in household tasks as this helps them to feel empowered and part of the family.
- Support wider family circles or relatives to become involved in the child or young person's life as this increases their sense of belonging.
- Develop a sense of humour within the family. Laughter is often a great stress reliever. This can make everyone feel better, and helps to keep a positive perspective on things.
- Spend time with other children in the family and try to ensure that they get adequate amounts of parental time. Encourage awareness within siblings of these factors and ask them to consider how they can help.
- Remember, as parents you need to look after yourself too. Try to treat yourself occasionally to something that you enjoy. Don't feel guilty about feeling that you need a break or that you can't cope from time to time. Look out for local support groups or carers forums. Alternatively, contact your local children's disability team to discuss respite or break options.

Friendships and Relationships

At home the child or young person may have close supportive relationships with parents and other family members, but unlike other young people, they can have fewer opportunities to make friends and enjoy a social life outside of the home. This can make them feel isolated and can make it harder for them to develop relationships with others in later life. As well as providing practical help and support, friends can contribute to the child or young person's emotional stability, helping them to become more independent, cope better with frustration, envy and jealousy. Some learning disabilities such as Autistic Spectrum Disorders may mean that the child or young person has difficulty interacting socially with people they are unfamiliar with. In these cases a specific support plan may need to be put in place.



Hints and Tips

- Help your child to form friendships by encouraging attendance at school, local youth clubs and other recreational activities. This will help the child to develop attachments and be comfortable with new faces and people outside of the family.
- Family members and carers can offer practical support such as organising transport and making telephone calls to help friendships develop.
- Encourage the child or young person to experience positive experiences of normal childhood/adolescence, such as sleepovers, having friends visit, or contacting friends by telephone.
- Advocacy and befriending schemes can be other sources of friendships and relationships.
- Increasing friendships and circles of support provides opportunities for your child to enjoy a wider social network by including people with and without disabilities.



Meaningful Social Activity

Children and young people with a learning disability may find themselves with limited opportunities to fully enjoy leisure time with their peers. Different levels of ability should not stand in the way of parents and staff encouraging children to pursue meaningful social activity. It is important for children and young people to feel part of the community and to engage with others. This will also help them to live a fuller life. Social activities can decrease levels of depression and boost self-esteem, change behaviours and increase social skills.



Hints and Tips

- Encourage play, help the child or young person to develop interests or hobbies.
- Let them try different things. Creative activities (art, dance, drama, music) can be particularly enjoyable. Check your local youth club, leisure, church and education centres to see what's available.
- Animals can also be a meaningful part of a child or young person's life. This helps them to learn to care and form bonds.
- Encourage sporting activities to promote a balanced healthy lifestyle.
- If possible try to help the child or young person become involved in 'inclusive' activities with non disabled peers.
- Group based activities that enable the child or young person to participate appropriately to their needs should be encouraged. Activities performed within a group strengthen social support ties, develop self confidence and are known to reduce stress.

Support During Changes and Transitions

Changes are a natural part of all of our lives. At times these can be planned for well ahead and at other times things happen where there may be little time to prepare. Most children and young people cope well with change, but sometimes changes are difficult to come to terms with and may create feelings of uncertainty. Changes in routine, lifestyle or relationships can be daunting if they arise unexpectedly, or when the need for the change is not understood. For a child with a learning disability, progressing through puberty, experiencing a bereavement, changing schools, and transferring to adult services (usually at age 19), or employment can all be examples of times when adapting to changes are necessary, but may prove challenging. The child or young person should be involved in any decisions about their life and their future.



Hints and Tips

- During periods of change in the child or young person's life, they are likely to require extra support and reassurance from friends, family members and educators.
- The physical and emotional effects during transition from childhood through adolescence may be a particularly stressful period for the young person and their family. You may wish to discuss with the teacher, the level and type of personal/social development education received by the young person in school, which will help you reinforce the same messages at home.
- During the period of transition from childhood to adulthood, help the child or young person prepare by finding out what is available locally. Are there any supported work placement schemes available? Does the young person wish to continue with their education in a college, or alternatively will the local adult resource centre adequately meet their needs?
- Help them to contribute to transition plans by making them aware that their wishes are important and that these will be facilitated where possible.
- You should consider if there are any independent living skills that the young person will benefit from in the transition to adulthood, such as learning to use public transport, or how to use money.
- There is good literature available to help support staff and parents - for example "The Road Ahead" (see page 16 for further information).



Involved in Making Choices and Decisions

Helping children and young people to be involved in making choices and decisions or “speaking up” for themselves (self-advocacy), is a known protective factor. Traditionally we have tended to address the needs of children and young people with a learning disability by speaking on their behalf, or by taking an over-protective approach to ensure they “get the best”. However, by encouraging participation in decisions, you will help the child or young person to feel that they have some control over their lives, develop their confidence, and help them express their thoughts and feelings. Of course, this needs to be balanced with adequate protection.

Hints and Tips

- Encourage the child to be involved in, and have a say in day to day family decisions, such as what to have for breakfast or dinner, what clothes to wear, or what leisure activities they want to pursue.
- Where appropriate this should also be encouraged from an early age within the school setting.
- Decisions and choices made by children and young people with a learning disability should be listened to, considered and discussed.
- Taking risks is an important requirement in allowing children and young people to make choices, although it will be important to balance risk taking alongside ensuring adequate protection.
- Do not always put in place what you think is the best solution to problems or difficulties that the child or young person may encounter. Rather, take the opportunity to encourage them to express their thoughts and feelings. Also encourage and support them to identify ways of addressing the problems they face.
- Give the child ‘age appropriate’ responsibilities which will enhance opportunities to be involved, feelings of making a contribution, and give them experiences of making choices and decisions.



Care and Support

Probably the most important factor for building resilience centres around the child or young person knowing that they have several adults in a range of settings, predominantly at home and in school, who they can turn to and know they care. It is



important that parents, other family members, teachers, and health and social care professionals say through their words and actions “I care about you.” What is important is being there; when they need someone to ask for help, for them to share their feelings and concerns with, and to explore ways to solve problems.

Hints and Tips

- Make time for the child or young person, particularly during difficult periods, when they have made mistakes, haven't progressed as expected, are disappointed or are in any form of physical or emotional distress. This is when you are needed most, and it is through this contact that the child or young person will come to learn that you are there for them.
- Regularly remind the child or young person that you are there for them.
- Keep promises made to the child or young person.
- Do not laugh at or criticise mistakes.
- Listening to your child is as important as talking to them. It boosts self esteem in that you value what they have to say.
- Sometimes it is important to turn off the TV, or disregard the usual routine and do something fun together as a family.



If you have **Concerns** or are **Worried**

It is important to acknowledge that this guide aims to help you promote good emotional well being and mental health, and reduce the chances of the onset of mental health problems in the child or young person you care for, or work with. However, from time to time, even when all preventative steps have been taken, mental health problems still arise. Therefore the following tips and hints are provided to help you in such circumstances.

Hints and Tips

- Because you know the child or young person so well, you are likely to be the first to notice that something is wrong.
- Sometimes the child or young person will be able to tell you that they feel unhappy, anxious, worried or strange. However, for some, verbal communication may be difficult, and emotional problems may be expressed through changes in their behaviour such as aggression, self injury, sleeping problems or irritability.
- However, you should also consider other seemingly less challenging changes in behaviour such as the child or young person becoming quieter, more withdrawn, changes in patterns of communication, changes in appetite, or a deterioration in personal care skills.
- Although such changes could be related to physical health problems or pain, they could also be as a consequence of mental health problems.
- Should a marked change in behaviour occur it is vital that you seek help as soon as possible to stop problems becoming more serious. The first point of contact is likely to be with the child or young person's GP. They can carry out a full health check to try and find out why such changes are taking place.



Resources Section

“The Road Ahead”: This report provides a thorough literature review and guidance to help plan for the transition from childhood to adulthood. It can be accessed at:

<http://www.scie.org.uk/publications/tra/literature/section1.asp>

For guidance with regard to exercise and physical activity for people with a learning disability, see:

<http://www.bild.org.uk/pdfs/01news/move-it.pdf>

The Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities provides a range of resources centred around meeting the emotional needs of children and young people with a learning disability. Their web site can be accessed at:

www.learningdisabilities.org.uk

The Mental Health and Growing Up series contains 36 leaflets on a range of common mental health problems encountered by children and young people. These can be accessed at the following web site:

<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mentalhealthinformation/mentalhealthandgrowingup.aspx>

In 2001 the Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities carried out a major UK wide review of the services available to children and young people with a learning disability who have mental health needs. Services were found to be mostly deficient, and a number of recommendations were made. The reference for this publication is: Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities (2002) Count Us In: The report of the committee of inquiry into meeting the mental health needs of young people with learning disabilities, Mental Health Foundation, 2002.

K. Forster and D. Grundy (2008) “Candle: CAMHS and New Directions in Learning Disability and Ethnicity: A resource for frontline staff, their supervisors/managers and trainers” Association for Real Change.

There are also a number of other organisations that can provide help or advice. These include:

- Your Local Health and Social Care Trusts Children or Adult Disability Team
- Your GP
- Positive Futures: www.positive-futures.net
- And other local voluntary and community sector providers

We would like to thank all parents and carers who helped in the making of this guide.