Practice Point: Working With Pregnant Women with Learning Difficulties

Key facts
During pregnancy, women with learning difficulties are significantly more likely than other pregnant women to:

- Experience preeclampsia
- Have babies with a low birth weight
- Have their baby admitted to neonatal intensive care or special care nursery
- Experience adverse mental health outcomes, such as depression, anxiety and stress.

Social isolation can predispose mothers with learning difficulties and their children to a number of negative health and social outcomes, including:

- Increased parenting stress
- Higher incidence of maternal mental health problems
- More difficulties with maternal child interactions.

Practice tips
Given the many vulnerabilities of pregnant women with learning difficulties and their unborn babies, it is paramount these women receive appropriate support. The support should respect the mother’s central role in the life of her child and start early in pregnancy, particularly if women are to be supported in decisions regarding continuing the pregnancy or not. Support has a vital role to play in the success of a woman with learning difficulties having and caring for her baby safely. A woman’s support network can either enhance or undermine her as a mother.

Ask yourself:

- Were you invited (at the mothers’ request) to be a member of the created support network?
- Has the support service been ‘imposed’ upon the mother, such as in the case of a court order?
- Is there a good rapport between you and the expectant mother?
- Does the mother believe that you respect her position as mother of her child?
- Does the mother have any concerns that support services, or others within the support network, may try and take over the care of her child?

When providing support:

- Communicate your respect for the woman as mother of her child and the important role that a mother plays in her child’s life
- Take time to explore and understand her excitement and concerns about the impending arrival of her child
Understanding support in the context of a network
When assessing the support needs of pregnant women with learning difficulties it is important to consider those around the mother: the support network she is creating for herself and her unborn baby. Like many mothers-to-be, pregnant women with learning difficulties rarely expect that they will provide for every aspect of care for their newborn babies. They anticipate that others will fulfil some care roles for their children.

- Explore with the mother the support that others intend to provide and how these complement her skills
- With the mother’s permission, involve those in her support network to identify any ‘gaps’ in how care will be provided for the new baby

Meeting the needs of a new baby
Some expectant mothers with learning difficulties will require support to get organised for the arrival of their babies. Others may need assistance with basic skills in the care of a newborn. Some creativity may be needed in teaching skills relating to an unborn baby, such as using a doll to teach child care skills in an interactive way. Teaching parenting skills will be more effective for mothers with learning difficulties if skills are presented in a way that is:

- Specific
- Structured
- Situational
- Parent-directed
- Skill-focused

What we know
During pregnancy most women (both with and without learning difficulties) anticipate that family, friends and services will provide some level of support in the care for their soon-to-be-born child. They actively engage with people who they believe will assist them to have and raise their babies in accordance with the way they see fit. Pregnant women with learning difficulties distance themselves from those they believe will try and ‘take over’ the care of the child once born, or try and replace them as mother.

In short, expectant mothers want people to support them in a way that respects them as the mothers of their children. ‘Support’ can be competence inhibiting when it is provided by others who disregard the kind of help that mothers request. Mothers may choose to have no support rather than have people involved who they feel will disregard their wishes or their central role in the life of their child. This may include service providers.

Want to know more?
There are few pregnancy resources for women with learning difficulties that present information in a way that they can easily understand. In response to this, the Australian Supported Parenting Consortium, as a part of the Healthy Start strategy developed Healthy Start for Me & My Baby. This resource aims to provide critical health information and promote informed participation in antenatal care visits for women with learning difficulties.
Healthy Start for Me & My Baby was developed based on a comprehensive literature review as well as extensive consultation with midwives and women with learning difficulties. It was trialed across a number of services and found to be a highly useful resource for both women with learning difficulties and the professionals who support them during the antenatal period. Further information about Healthy Start for Me & My Baby, including how to purchase the resource is available via the Healthy Start website (www.healthystart.net.au)

Further details on best practice principles for teaching parenting skills to parents with learning difficulties can also be found on the Healthy Start website.
References


