Practice Point: Working with pregnant women with learning difficulties – Planning for baby’s arrival

What we know about women with learning difficulties during pregnancy

Having a baby and becoming a mother is, for many women, an exciting time of life. Like other women, women with learning difficulties often delight in their pregnant bodies and the baby growing within them. Some mothers talk about feeling connected to their baby from the moment it’s conceived, for others that feeling grows as the baby develops. The stories women with learning difficulties tell of their experiences as pregnant women and as new mothers are often no different to any other women expecting a baby. As a Healthy Start Network Member from WA once said “I’ve never met a parent who said ‘I don’t want to be a good parent’”.

However, other people in the lives of these women often treat pregnancy as a grave mistake. They face significant opposition to their pregnancies, including pressure to abort the pregnancy, from their families, their friends and the services that support them.

Health outcomes for mothers and their babies

Women with learning difficulties and their babies are at greater risk of poor health outcomes during pregnancy and the early postpartum period. Quality care is therefore paramount in the antenatal period to give these vulnerable mothers and their newborn babies the best start in life. 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.

Support for women with learning difficulties during pregnancy

Mothers with learning difficulties are often socially isolated, with few friends or connections to their local community. Social isolation can predispose mothers 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.

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.

**Principles to guide practice**

Given the multiple vulnerabilities of pregnant women with learning difficulties and
their unborn babies, it is paramount these women receive appropriate support,
which respects the mother’s central role in the life of her child. Ideally, such support
should commence 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.

**The practitioner’s position within the pregnant woman’s support network**

If women with learning difficulties strategically create support networks during
pregnancy to support them in their role as mother, practitioners need to consider
their own position within that support network as well as the perceptions the
expectant mother might hold regarding the practitioner role.

Ask yourself:

- Was the practitioner 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 the practitioner and the expectant mother?
- Does the mother believe that the practitioner respects 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 compliment 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-focussed
What Healthy Start resources are appropriate for antenatal care?

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 trialled 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 Healthy Start: www.healthystart.net.au/resources/practical-tools

Further details on best practice principles for teaching parenting skills to parents with learning difficulties can be found at: www.healthystart.net.au/resources/practice-points.

References


