

Early years

Vision Statement



All children with a learning disability have a right to support during their early years that will enable them to live fulfilling, independent lives in the future¹. Mencap's vision is a future where every child with a learning disability has the best possible start in life. We want every family to get the support they need to help them meet the individual needs of their child, as early as possible.

Current situation

In the UK, approximately 15,000 children are born every year who have, or will have, a learning disability. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, there are approximately 118,500 children who have a learning disability aged 0-7² (the early years³).

Children with a learning disability are at risk of facing a number of inequalities that are evident in early life. These include worse mental and physical health, increased family poverty, and poorer educational attainment.^{4,5}

There is wide recognition among UK government policy and international theory and practice of the importance of early intervention, especially for children at risk, to boost early development. However, while we know that early intervention is important, there is evidence to suggest that families of children with a learning disability are not receiving the support they need.



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Families have told us⁶ there are a number of barriers to accessing the right support for children with a learning disability and their parents or carers. Many families struggle to get their child's needs identified once they suspect a problem. This is worsened by a lack of high quality information available to them about their child's needs and what support is available to them. Families report that information provided often focuses on what a child might not be able to do, rather than what they could achieve.

Families also say there is not enough high quality support available to meet a child's or family's needs in the early years. Where support is received, too often professionals working with their children do not have the right skills, and do not work effectively together, to meet additional needs.

What we want

Mencap wants to see all children with a learning disability being able to access high quality, inclusive services, and specialist support they need to boost their development.

Families must also receive support to equip them with the skills and confidence to meet their child's needs.

Mencap believe that the following needs to happen to make this a reality:

- Support must be offered as soon as needs are identified
- There must be enough funding to ensure accessible, high quality early intervention services for children with a learning disability and their families
- Mainstream services must be inclusive for children with a learning disability, with early years professionals being able to meet a wide range of needs
- The advice and information that families receive should equip them with knowledge of their rights and an insight into the lived experiences of other families and people with a learning disability
- Support for children with a learning disability must look at the needs of the whole family and be planned with them

Last reviewed: July 2016

Next review: currently being reviewed

1. UNCRC Article 23. Mencap is clear that this should include high aspirations for all children and be linked to helping them work towards their own personal ambition
2. ONS, Annual Mid-year Population Estimates: 2014'. Estimated likely number of people with a learning disability, at 2% prevalence rate
3. The early years age range varies across the UK. In England it is 0-5, in Northern Ireland it is 0-6 and in Wales it is 0-7. This vision statement does not, however, explicitly cover children in primary education. To read more about children and young people with a learning disability in the education system, read our education vision statement
4. 2015 IHAL report on inequalities facing children with intellectual disabilities
5. To read more about the long-term health of people with a learning disability, read our health vision statement
6. Mencap has conducted in-depth interviews with nearly 100 professionals and parents of young children with a learning disability about their experiences of the early years