



mencap NI



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Evaluation of OCN Level 2 Award in Learning Disability Positive Support in the Early Years

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Introduction

Mencap Northern Ireland is committed to ensuring children with a learning disability and their families have access to effective early intervention services and approaches. To build capacity in early years practitioners, Mencap NI has created an Early Years Training Programme with a range of short courses to support staff working in early year settings. As part of this programme, Mencap NI has developed an eight-week training course 'Learning Disability: Positive Support in the Early Years'. The purpose of the course is to provide staff with theory and knowledge about learning disabilities and to develop practical skills to better support children within Early Years settings.

Learners completing the course are awarded a nationally recognised qualification from the Open College Network Northern Ireland (OCN NI) Level 2 in recognition of their achievement. Mencap NI commissioned Stats & Stories to independently evaluate the first roll out of this training course to gain a better understanding of how well the course meets the needs of learners and to identify any areas for improvement.



Overview of “Learning Disability: Positive Support in the Early Years” Course

The ‘Learning Disability: Positive Support in the Early Years’ course ran for eight weeks. This included six weeks of guided teaching with a further two weeks given to work on the Portfolio for Independent Study for Assessment as part of the OCN NI qualification. Each week a topic such as creating an inclusive environment, communication or sensory integration and processing was explored in an interactive way with group discussions, team activities and sharing professional experiences of working in early years settings. Learning outcomes for the course were identified as:

- Comprehend definitions and terminology surrounding learning disability with an ability to recognise the importance of current legislation, policies and strategies
- Understand the role and responsibilities of professionals who support children with a learning disability
- Recognise the importance of parent/practitioner relationships and challenges faced by families
- Understand the importance of the learning environment and how various strategies can improve quality of learning for children with a learning disability
- Comprehend sensory integration/processing and explorative play in the early years context
- Identify strategies that promote communication and manage challenging behaviours.

The assignment and assessment activities were designed to ensure all learning outcomes were achieved and the assessment criteria for the OCN NI Level 2 was successfully met.

Evaluation Methodology

The Learning Disability: Positive Support in the Early Years course ran three times during the pilot period with a total of 36 participants as displayed in Table 1. Two groups were held in person at the Mencap NI's Centre in Belfast while the third group was delivered exclusively online. Feedback was gathered at three points at the end of each course in October 2022, December 2022 and March 2023.

Table 1: Participants by Group

Group Number	Dates	Participant Numbers	Delivery Type
Group 1	August - October 2022	10	In person
Group 2	October - December 2022	10	In person
Group 3	January - March 2023	16	Online

A mixed method approach was used in this evaluation combining both quantitative and qualitative methods to gather the perspectives of early year practitioners.

To evaluate the course, an online survey was used at the final session to measure participants' knowledge and understanding and evaluate participants' satisfaction with the training.

A total of 29 participants completed the online survey. Three focus groups were conducted with 28 participants to provide the opportunity for learners to reflect on how their understanding and skills had developed during the course.

Qualitative data from the focus groups was thematically analysed to identify key themes.

Results

Section 1: Demographics

The Learning Disability: Positive Support in the Early Years course was attended by participants from a range of early years settings, as displayed in Figure 1. One fifth were drawn from local charity organisations (20.7%) with 17.2% working from home as childminders. Participants also worked in statutory pre-school settings (13.8%), private daycare nurseries (10.3%) or playgroups (10.3%). A smaller number of participants were students (13.8%) or others such as parents/carers (13.8%).

Figure 1: Background of early years practitioners

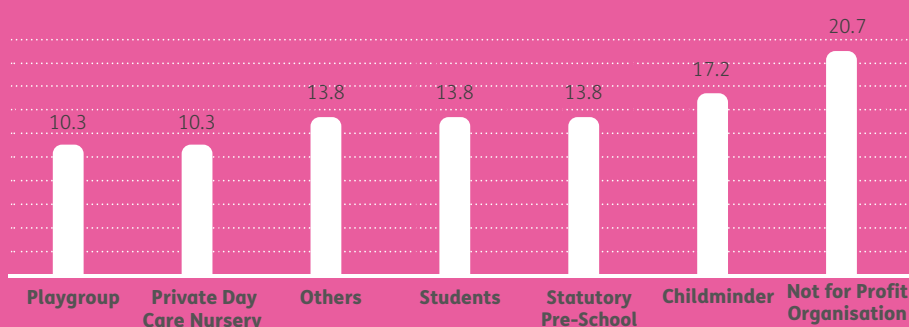
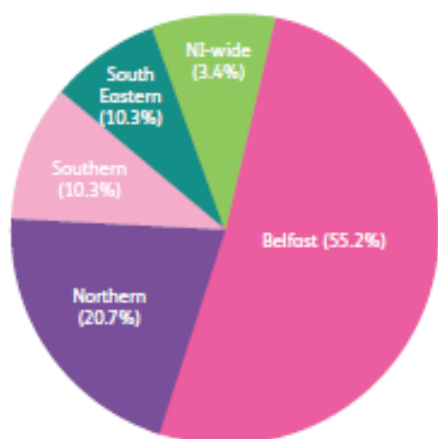


Figure 2: Participants by health and Social care trust



The majority of learners worked within the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust (55.2%) followed by the Northern Health and Social Care Trust (20.7%) as displayed in Figure 2. No participants worked in the Western Health and Social Care Trust.

Most learners had not received any specific training on learning disability in their role as an early years practitioner before attending this course (62.1%). Of those that had attended training on learning disability before, 55.6% had attended training within the past two years, while 22.2% had attended training in the past five years with 22.2% having received training on learning disability over five years ago.

Learners' Motivation

All participants in the focus groups were asked about their motivation for participating in the Learning Disability: Positive Support in the Early Years course. The most common reason participants gave was to gain more knowledge about learning disabilities. There were several motivating factors for this. Many learners recognised that there were a growing number of children with learning disabilities in their setting and they wanted to be better equipped to respond to their needs. Specifically, participants wanted to learn strategies and approaches that would support children with learning disabilities in their early years setting:

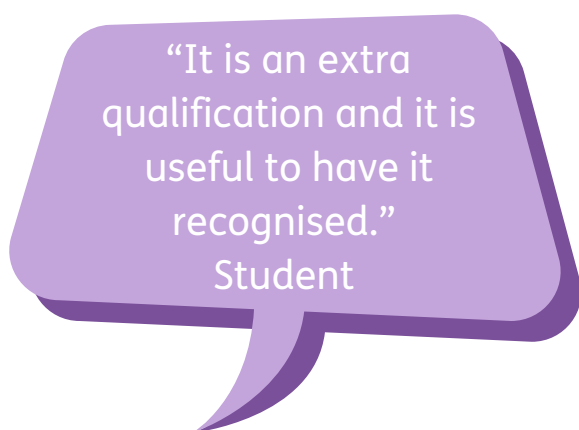
I did the course to help me work with kids with special needs. I have seen so much of it in the past, since COVID, I want more awareness of how to deal with kids and their parents.
Childminder

I wanted to do this course because we have found a lot more children coming through with additional needs and I want to better myself to help them get the best experience of day care and help them learn.
Practitioner in Private Daycare Setting

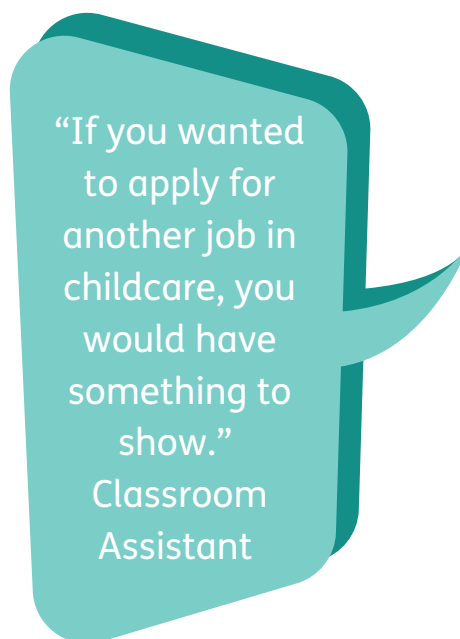
Every year we get several children who end up in special schools but we obviously need to do the best we can for them until they can find the placement that best suits them. We have been struggling with that and I am trying to educate myself more about it.
Head Teacher

Learners also reported that they wanted to increase their knowledge and understanding of children with learning disabilities as a way to support parents. This was described as offering reassurance to parents that their child's needs were being met, suggesting different approaches that could be implemented both in the early years setting and at home and being able to communicate concerns to parents in an appropriate way. Other motivating factors for undertaking the Positive Support in the Early Years course was to refresh their knowledge on this topic or increase their job opportunities in the future.

Participants were also asked how motivated they were by achieving an accreditation at OCN NI Level 2. Mixed views were expressed about whether participants were motivated by this as some learners were unaware that the course was accredited. For those that were unaware the course was accredited, this was not a motivating factor in taking the course although they viewed this as a bonus. For those that were aware that the course was accredited, they reported that they valued the qualification and it was important that their progress was acknowledged. These learners also felt that this qualification could be useful in increasing their future job prospects:



"It is an extra qualification and it is useful to have it recognised."
Student



"If you wanted to apply for another job in childcare, you would have something to show."
Classroom Assistant

Section 2: Knowledge and Learning

The majority of participants (96.6%) strongly agreed or agreed that their knowledge and understanding about learning disability had increased after completing the Learning Disability: Positive Support in the Early Years course.

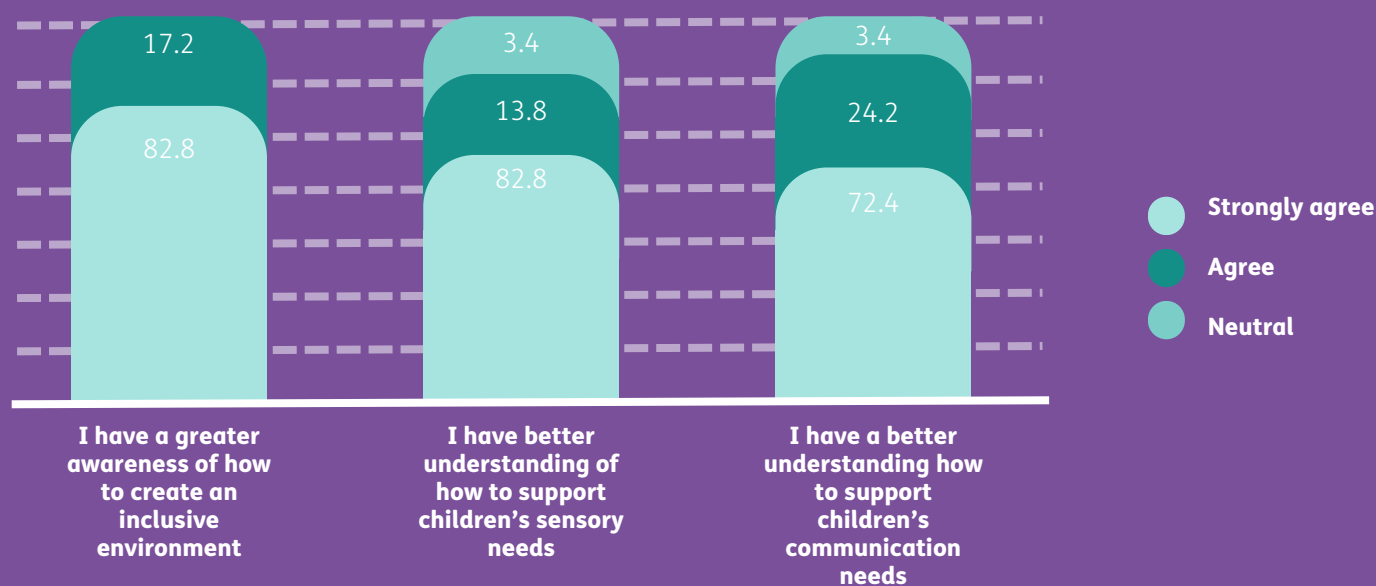
The following sections outline how participants' knowledge and understanding of learning disability in terms of:

- 1. Supporting children*
- 2. Supporting parents has developed during the course*

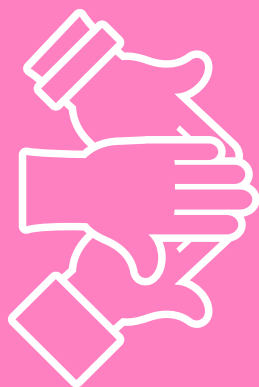
Support for Children

All participants strongly agreed (89.7%) or agreed (10.3%) that after completing the Learning Disability: Positive Support in the Early Years course that their understanding of how to support children with a learning disability has increased. Furthermore, the majority of participants reported that their confidence in how to support challenging behaviours has increased (96.6%). As shown in Figure 3, results indicate that knowledge has increased for the majority of participants in terms of creating an inclusive environment, supporting sensory needs and a better understanding of supporting communication for children with a learning disability.

Figure 3: Participants' Awareness and Understanding of Supporting Children with Learning Disabilities



These three themes of an inclusive environment, sensory integration and communication, which were identified as learning outcomes of the course, were explored further in the focus groups. Participants were asked to identify what they particularly found helpful to support children and if they had made any changes to support children in their setting. Responses to each theme are outlined below.



Inclusive Environment

As shown in Figure 3, all participants agreed or strongly agreed that they had a greater awareness of how to create an inclusive environment for children with a learning disability. Participants in all three focus groups highlighted that they found the suggestion that 'less is more' in their setting useful. The two groups that attended the course in the Mencap NI Centre found it particularly helpful to see how the Children's Centre was set up and mirror their room plan. Many participants reported that they had implemented changes to the environment by restructuring their space, changing wall displays and lighting or reducing the number of toys available for children to play with.

Sensory Integration and Processing

The majority of learners (96.6%) reported that they had a better understanding of how to support the sensory needs of children with learning disabilities. Participants in the focus groups gave different examples of how their understanding of how children with learning disabilities may be affected by poor sensory integration. Participants reported that they had a better understanding of how children's behaviour may be impacted. Participants also found it particularly useful to learn about two other senses, proprioception and vestibular sense, which control body awareness, balance and spatial orientation. For many learners this was the first time they had heard this terminology.



Communication



Most participants (96.6%) reported that they had a better understanding of how to support the communication needs of children with a learning disability. A key learning reported by participants was a greater understanding that all behaviour is a form of communication. Learners found this important for working with children with speech and language needs and reported that they had adopted many different methods to support children to communicate. These included the ABC chart, cue cards and Makaton. Participants also reported that they had successfully used techniques they had learnt in the course such as Intensive Interaction or the Attention Bucket approach to support communication within their setting. Participants observed that using these approaches had resulted in children being more engaged with their peers and more engaged with staff with some children starting to repeat words back to teachers.

Support for Parents

The majority of participants (96.5%) reported that the course had increased their understanding of how to support parents of children with a learning disability. Learners felt that the course helped them to consider the perspectives of parents of a child with a learning disability and increased their awareness of different approaches to use when communicating with parents. Participants reported that they learnt about the importance of working with parents as partners to support their child and felt that the course gave them more authority to talk to parents about their child. Learners also reported that participating in the course to increase their knowledge and skills offered parents additional reassurance that practitioners could meet their child's needs within the early years setting. Participants highlighted that the resources related to supporting parents such as videos and case studies were useful in providing a way for practitioners to reflect on how to approach parents.



Quotes from Participants

“Every year we get several children who end up in special schools but we obviously need to do the best we can for them until they can find the placement that best suits them. We have been struggling with that and I am trying to educate myself more about it.”

Head Teacher

“I didn’t understand before that when a child is hitting out it could be because they like the noise of it or the feeling of it. I did really learn a lot from that class.”

Nursery Worker

“The course taught me that less is more especially when it comes to children feeling very overwhelmed that would have sensory processing. I think as a childcare practitioner and you see all this fabulous equipment you sometimes need to hear that to know that you are putting a bit too much in.”

Director of Learning Disability Charity

“After communication week, we started intensive interaction with one of the kids in our class who is struggling with his language development and he has come on leaps and bounds since we started that. You can see the connection he is making even though he doesn’t have the words.”

Classroom Assistant in
Special School

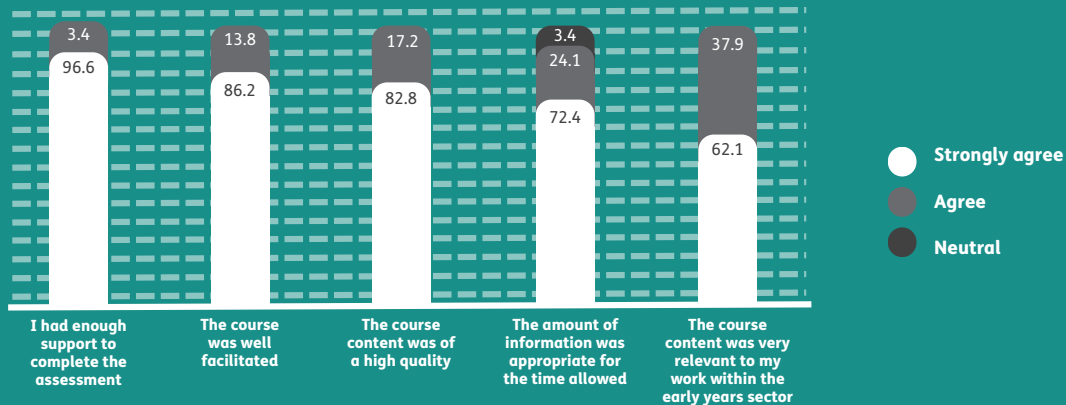
“I think it is important to understand that some parents are scared. They can be overwhelmed.”

Nursery Worker

Section 3: Evaluation of the Course

On completion of the Learning Disability: Positive Support in the Early Years course, participants were asked to evaluate a number of aspects of the course. Results show participants had high levels of satisfaction with the course. All participants reported that the course content was very relevant to their work within the early years sector. As displayed in Figure 4, all participants agreed or strongly agreed that they had enough support for the assessment, that the course was facilitated well and the course content was of high quality. The majority of participants also agreed that the amount of information was appropriate for the time allowed (96.5%).

Figure 4: Participants' 'Evaluation of Learning Disability: Positive Support in the Early Years' course



Analysis of the qualitative data from the focus groups revealed that there were two interrelated themes that participants identified as having a positive impact on their experience of the course:

1. Course Content:

Learners highlighted that the course content was engaging and well presented on slides. Participants particularly appreciated receiving the slides via email each week as it allowed them to follow up on areas of interest outside of class time. Participants also reported that there was a good blend of content in the course including videos, case studies and practical information which supported their learning:

"I thought the case studies were quite good because you were having to think about what you had learnt in real practical terms, in a specific way to one specific child. We don't have very many with special needs in my setting but this allowed me to think about what I would do, based on what I had learnt."

Pre-School Classroom Assistant

"It was good hearing the different scenarios and putting myself in that position where I would not have really had that chance before."

Childminder

Specifically, learners appreciated the group work activities as they felt it was important to share professional experiences and to have the opportunity to learn from others in the group.

2. Course Facilitator:

Closely linked to the course content was how well the course was delivered. Universal praise was given to the course tutor by learners. Participants valued the help and support provided by the tutor and found that the tutor's ability to reflect on her professional and lived experience with children with learning disabilities beneficial. Participants also highlighted that they found the tutor supportive and responsive to helping them with the assessment.

"Everything was very well explained, with lots of support and I really enjoyed it."

Student

"I feel that this course has really helped me gain a better understanding and to become more comfortable within my role when supporting children with additional needs. [The tutor] was so good at delivering the course content and was always there to help and assist when needed."

Private Day Care Nursery Worker

All participants reported that they would recommend this course to others.

Overview of "Learning Disability: Positive Support in the Early Years" Course

Evidence gathered during this evaluation indicates that the Learning Disability: Positive Support in the Early Years course was successful in achieving its aim to increase knowledge about children with learning disabilities and to provide practitioners with a range of strategies to better support children within early years settings.

Results demonstrate that the learning outcomes of the course were appropriate to meet the needs of practitioners working in a range of early years settings, specifically in terms of increasing knowledge of creating an inclusive environment, supporting sensory needs and a better understanding of supporting communication for children with a learning disability.

Many participants reported that they had already made changes within their early years setting which had proven beneficial for children with learning disabilities. Similarly, learners reported that they had a better understanding of how to support parents of children with a learning disability and had learnt different ways to approach parents through the course.

Overall, participants' satisfaction with the course was high. All participants agreed that the course content was of high quality and well facilitated by the course tutor who was widely praised by participants for her insight and expertise. Furthermore, all participants reported that they would recommend this course to others.

While consideration should be given to the mode of delivery as the majority preferred classroom-based learning and the length of each session in terms of upscaling the course, this evaluation concludes that the pilot of the Learning Disability: Positive Support in the Early Years course has been successful in achieving its outcomes of building capacity in early years practitioners to support children with a learning disability.