Learning Disabilities

The term *learning disability* is given to any condition which reduces a person's intellectual ability and can cause difficulty to a person in managing everyday tasks independently. A learning disability is often confused with a learning difficulty but both are different. A learning difficulty is seen as a condition that is specific to an area of learning but doesn't affect a person's overall IQ.

The Department of Health defines a learning disability as a "significant reduced ability to understand new or complex information, to learn new skills (impaired intelligence), with a reduced ability to cope independently (impaired social functioning), which started before adulthood." Figures from the NHS show that around 1.5 million people in the UK have a learning disability.

Learning disabilities affect each person differently and can vary in the impact they have on a person. Some difficulties relating to a learning disability include:

- communication difficulties
- academic difficulties e.g. difficulty learning new things
- difficulties with independent living skills or personal care

A learning disability occurs during a person's brain development either during pregnancy, birth or in early childhood. Sometimes there is no definable cause for this, other times there can be a single factor or a combination of causes. These can include:

- an illness during pregnancy
- complications during birth in which the brain was starved of oxygen
- genetic inheritance
- brain injury caused by an accident or illness
- associated conditions that the person may have such as Down's Syndrome.

Diagnosing a learning disability

To be diagnosed with a learning disability before birth an expectant mother may be offered tests during pregnancy. These tests can carry risk in themselves so are always best discussed with a midwife. The two tests which are usually used are

- Amniocentesis: this test checks on a baby's progress and looks at whether they are likely to develop a genetic condition. The test is most commonly used with women over 35 who are at an increased risk during pregnancy because of their age. It may also be used with women who have a history of disabilities in the family.
- Chorionic Villus Sampling (CVS) - CVS is another test which detects genetic disorders. This test can be carried out an earlier stage of pregnancy than amniocentesis but is not carried out in addition to.

Some parents may receive a diagnosis after their child is born during early childhood. This can be harder to spot sometimes but the signs may include:

- the baby has trouble feeding
- delayed developmental milestones such as sitting up

A GP can usually give a diagnosis of a learning disability or it may be identified at a developmental check by a health visitor. Depending on the prevalence of the learning disability a diagnosis can be hard to get and some people may never receive a diagnosis. Often children are diagnosed with global developmental delay (GDD) rather than a learning disability. GDD occurs between birth and the age of 18 and the term is used to describe a child that is delayed in reaching key milestones of development.