



## Parent Education and Training

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**Parents with intellectual disability frequently encounter difficulties with learning that can impact on the effectiveness of any intervention offered:**

- Difficulty retaining and applying new skills
  - Tendency to overgeneralise instructions
  - Difficulty following complex instructions, or modifying instructions
  - Problems with long and short term memory
  - Difficulty in correctly recognizing cues and responding to the child
  - Difficulty in recognizing problems and problem solving
  - Difficulty with reading or only able to read basic words
  - Difficulty with judgement and decision-making
  - ‘Splinter skills’ – parents may exhibit very good abilities in some areas and yet have a surprising lack of skills in others
- Parent education interventions should be based on family identified needs, with parents being involved in the planning and implementation of the program.

**Parent education programs will be more effective with parents with intellectual disability if they are:**

- I. **Specific** – programs must be specifically targeted to the parent’s individual needs for learning;
  - II. **Situational** – the tasks must be taught where the skill is needed i.e. in the home;
  - III. **Structured** – this involves behavioural principles being incorporated into programs; tasks and skills being taught in small steps, modeling new tasks, giving feedback, and providing opportunities for practice and repetition.
- The relationship between educator and parent should emphasize reciprocity and partnership, acknowledging that each person can be a resource to the other. Parents with intellectual disability also learn about parenting as they experience and practice it. The extent to which this is the case of course, will depend on the parents’ interest in and support for learning.

- Support needs to be long term, ongoing and consistent if parents are to integrate new parenting strategies over the lifespan of their children. Skills are more likely to be maintained if the teaching includes generalization training, where parents are given experience and tools to generalize their new skills in a variety of settings and situations. Unless there are opportunities for parents to apply their learning to everyday situations, to learn, revisit and discuss successes and disappointments in their attempts, there is a risk that they will not remember what they will have learned.

## What We Can Do

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- Structure programs in keeping with the aforementioned principles
- Be aware of operating value systems: your own value base and that of the program you are using.
- Prior to formulating parent training programs consider the significant effects of parental childhood experiences and respect for family traditions when assessing parent knowledge and skill.
- Individually assess what parents already know, how this was learnt, and how they learn best.



***Specific practice guidelines for workers implementing a home-based parenting education programme with parents with an intellectual disability are as follows:***

- Make good use of pictures that are realistic and concrete
- Allow for the active and practical participation of parents
- Provide opportunities for learners to monitor and reinforce their learning
- Set activities that are achievable within the context of the person's home
- Provide information in non-ambiguous, direct short statements
- Incorporate repetition of information using various methods. It is often necessary to repeat the information, perhaps over several visits.
- Ask the parent to explain to you what they think the information means – this will help you to know whether they have understood.
- Present material that is useful/relevant to the parent's needs and experiences
- Be flexible enough to adapt to and/or work around the disruptions and distractions of the home environment
- Take into account individual learning styles and personalities
- Build good rapport with parents and develop knowledge about their lives and experiences in order to effectively relate these to the home learning program
- Know about child health and safety issues beyond the necessarily restricted items covered in a time limited home learning program
- Be familiar with theories and sequences of child development
- Assess parents' abilities and tolerance levels for learning 'on the run' and be flexible enough to adapt the lessons accordingly
- Be sensitive to the individual learning styles and preferences of parents and adapt the lessons accordingly
- Be aware of the influences of cognitive limitations on learning as well as the social experiences of people with learning difficulties and the effects of these on their attitudes towards learning
- Be respectful, as a guest, of parents' authority in their own homes and their differing priorities and immediate needs
- Assess the impact of the attitudes and behaviour of significant others - utilize these when helpful to parents learning and help parents work around them when they are a negative influence
- Assess parents' abilities (including utilisation of social supports) to make the required changes to their homes and to offer practical assistance where necessary
- Work with significant others to help them understand the importance of the program and the information and skills it teaches

**More broadly, practitioners also need to consider:**

**1. The home environment as a place for learning**

Although this offers parents individualized, context-specific learning, there is the reality of a home with young children to contend with. Practitioners need to be flexible in managing these frequent distractions eg., schedule home visits during school hours/ term or when the baby is sleeping; provide children with food and entertainment prior to the lesson starting; include children where possible

**2. First things first**

This relates to the competing needs and priorities of parent participants and educators. For parents, the relationship with their educator and the opportunity to offload their immediate concerns may be more highly valued than the home learning activities. For parents it can be a case of needing to air personal issues before being able to concentrate on the task at hand. This requires parent educators to allow plenty of time for the home visit and to be good listeners and provide practical support, advice and information. Further, educators will need to be extremely flexible to fit into parents' sometimes hectic routines.

**3. Parent readiness to learn and apply knowledge**

Parents vary greatly in their readiness to learn and apply knowledge and past experience seems to be an important factor here. When previous learning experiences are characterized by failure and negative judgements, and/or parents' behaviour is being monitored by child welfare authorities, educators need to be particularly encouraging in helping these parents get started on the learning activities.

**4. Parent ability to make changes**

Some parents have little or no control over the home environment and feel quite powerless to apply the knowledge they have learned. Thus practitioners need to be aware that the effects of home visiting programs will be moderated by the parent's degree of control over the household.

**In light of these issues, parent educators need to be aware of the following practice points to ensure that parents are ready and able to participate fully and freely in a home-based learning program:**

- Be prepared to listen to and if possible address the concerns of parents before commencing a teaching activity
- Be flexible in planning to take into account individual parents' immediate needs and priorities in their everyday family lives
- Be aware of parents' previous experiences with learning (either in the school system or informally) and be prepared to adapt strategies and offer plenty of positive reinforcement
- Be prepared to reflect critically and in an ongoing way on personal values and assumptions and to guard against falling into the trap of 'knowing what is best for all parents'
- Be open to and interested in parents' life experiences and those of their family and friends so that these can be used in teaching and learning activities
- Be open to and aware of parents' home situations particularly others who influence the parent and be prepared to work with and engage significant others in assisting the parent to learn if at all possible.



## Further Reading

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