



Child Brain Injury  
Rehabilitation Service

# Life in lockdown with an LD

Q&A with Samantha Hadley,  
Senior Operations Manager and  
LD Nurse



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# Life in lockdown with LD: Friendships

People with a learning disability have fewer chances to take part in leisure activities or socialise with their peers, and so may have fewer friends.

Research shows that children and teenagers with a learning disability partake in fewer activities and participate less frequently than their peers without a learning disability. They also tend to have fewer friends (Solish et al., 2010; Taheri et al., 2016).

With lockdown increasing isolation and anxieties for many children and families, as part of Learning Disabilities Week 2020, we spoke to Samantha Hadley, Senior Operations Manager for the Child Brain Injury Rehabilitation Services (CBIRS) and Learning Disabilities Nurse with over 30 years' experience.

in our Q&A Samantha speaks about the challenges children and families face and some tip tips for getting through lockdown.

## What are the challenges with social inclusion for children with ABI?

We know that some children with a learning disability need additional support to notice those around them and/or to support them to interact with their peers, family members or class teachers and assistants. Some of the people that will be familiar with their individual likes and dislikes, specific communication ways and emotional needs will be missing from their lives as we face lockdown.

With lockdown forcing many children to stay at home away from familiar classroom assistants, teachers and peers they may also miss out on spending time with children that have similar specialist interests to them that may not be shared with the people they live with i.e. the workings of trains or sensory stimulation activities.

The family members that they are at home with may also be facing the additional pressures of trying to work from home, tending to the needs of other children in the house and the general running of the home. In addition to this, trying to find time in the day to enable these children to explore the possibility of building or maintaining a friendship or relationship with those around them is an added pressure.



The children may need help to organise their thoughts and their priorities as well as organise their day and the tasks involved in maintaining that social contact. They may need the assistance of someone that knows them well and knows their social circle well to know what contacts add value to their lives. Often those that attend a school for children with special educational needs access transport to get them there so the usual parental contacts at the school gate are not established.

The children that they form a friendship with may not live locally and may be transported in from a wider geographical location that would be usual at schools, making sustaining contact even more of a challenge. Those people that are caring for that individual may need to support the child with a learning disability to make socialising happen by gathering the contact details, making the initial contact on their behalf and arranging a suitable time date and method to communicate.

They may need to support them to prepare for the contact time by planning what they want to do during that time, what to talk about, whether the support worker will lead the conversation and whether the social contact will take place over a social networking platform or within the same proximity as the other person, whilst respecting the government guidelines.

Additionally, they may need to have a practice run using the platform. Processing visual or auditory information may be difficult for some children and it may be overwhelming to do both of these things together. In this case, they may be better suited to sharing an activity such as listening to music together.

As many of us have swapped the way we conduct our business over recent weeks we have all learnt that the social cues are quite different on a video call. We know that waiting in turn to talk is essential or we lose what people are saying and sometimes there is a delay in hearing what people are saying, so support may be needed when using this new method of communication.

## How is social inclusion impacted during lockdown?



## How do children and parents feel about lockdown?

As parents I would imagine that there is a very real feeling of isolation during this time. Their usual methods of support may be less easily accessed. Parents may not be aware of all the things that their child likes to do at school and may not be completely familiar with the structure their day.

In addition to this, they may be worried about how they will practically provide the constant level of supervision that their child needs to keep them safe and they may not have the tools in their bag to know how to encourage communication on an appropriate level, or how to use Zoom or Skype etc.

Due to the massive change in family life and additional stress or pressures in the home, the child's behaviour may present new challenges or demands and those caring for the child or young person may take a different response to that behaviour to the school; which may in turn feel unfamiliar to the child leading to them feeling unsafe. Parents may not have direct access to advice on how to manage this behaviour and may seek advice from grandparents or other 'non-professionals' that 'back in the day' took a very different approach; giving very mixed messages to the child which could inadvertently cause increased challenge.

Parents may not be really familiar with how to use the child's schedule or how to adapt and review it based on the child's level of development and/or progression. It may be usual for them to rely on schools to take the lead in reviewing and setting goals. Parents may be worried that there is a lack of access to teachers and the multi-disciplinary teams for reassurance that they are doing the right thing.

There may also be a lack of parental support groups that they can access during this time, meaning that the understanding from individuals who are in similar situations has also been removed, which could lead to further feelings of isolation.



We all like a bit of order in our day or our week and so we put things into our lives to create that – some more than others. Things like work, leisure routines and social events punctuate our week and give us a sense of stability. With schools closed, a lot of this structure will be removed from the child and the family's life. Parents may be worried that this lockdown may remain the government guidance for longer than they initially anticipated, especially as we roll quickly into the last half term of the school year and another 6 week school holiday looms just around the corner. This uncertainty and extended isolation could cause parents to worry that they might not be doing the right thing for their child.

## What anxieties do people have?

## How might these anxieties present?

The child or young person with a learning disability may make inappropriate/unsafe attempts to socialize outside of their normal circle by exploring unregulated social media platforms. Unfortunately the predators are well aware that there may be more opportunities for individuals to feel lonely at this time and so they are upping their investment of time looking out for the vulnerable.

In other children, some daily routines may be affected, such as their eating and sleeping habits, leading to an increase or decrease in these activities. A change may also be seen in behavior, such as becoming more withdrawn or constantly demanding attention.

Look after yourself first. You cannot help anyone if you don't have your own oxygen mask on. Decide what are real priorities and which things can be put on hold. Once these priorities are identified, make a plan and create a schedule that emphasized these things but also allows time for activities for enjoyment that nourish the soul.

One of these enjoyable activities could be accessing a support network in a slightly different way, such as contacting them through social media, arranging a zoom 'fake-away' with friends, or meeting at a safe distance.

People with a learning disability and the support networks around them are vulnerable to mental health problems. Mind have some great resources to help protect mental health.

If you're not sure where to go, Mencap can help find the right information and support about what services are available

And finally and very importantly the Child Brain injury Trust are working tirelessly to support families following ABI right now. They're offering virtual support and are publishing great factsheets such as how to manage behaviour at home and school.

## What advice would you give and where can people get support?

Most importantly, be kind to yourself!