



Borderline Intelligence

Parents may be perplexed when their children are assessed to have Borderline intellectual ability. They may have questions about what Borderline Intelligence is. How may their children's current and future learning be affected? What other impacts may there be on the development of their children? What can they do to help their children? While it is inevitable for parents to have worries on different levels, excessive worries are unhelpful in helping children overcome difficulties or build confidence, and may even have an adverse effect on the parent-child relationship. This factsheet contains information on Borderline Intelligence for parents to better understand the condition, so as to support and facilitate the development of their children in a more positive and effective way.

What is Borderline Intelligence?

Intelligence in general refers to an overall cognitive ability integrating logical reasoning, abstract thinking, problem solving, and judgment. Children with Borderline Intelligence are usually weaker in these abilities when compared with typical developing children while performing better than children with intellectual disability. Apart from the limitations in intellectual functioning, they may also have different degrees of difficulties in other areas, such as memory and executive functioning, social adaptive functioning, emotion regulation, and motor coordination skills (Greenspan, 2017). Currently, the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF) does not classify Borderline Intelligence as a type of disability. However, in view of their





limitations and difficulties, training and support in areas such as learning, social skills, and self-care are considered necessary. (Hassiotis, 2015).

How common is Borderline Intelligence and what are the causes?

The prevalence of Borderline Intelligence varies with the definition used in different countries. Some research suggest that about 13 to 15 in 100 people have Borderline Intelligence (Ales, & Rappo, & Pepi, 2015; Hassiotis, 2015). Statistically, about 6 to 7% of the population have Borderline intellectual ability. As research in Borderline Intelligence is scant, the causes remain unclear. In general, the possible risk factors include genetic, biological, and environmental causes (Peltopuro et al., 2014).

What are the learning, social, behavioural, emotional and everyday life difficulties of children with Borderline Intelligence?

Similar to typical developing children, children with Borderline intellectual ability have different temperaments, strengths, and weaknesses. Therefore, there are individual differences in the types of difficulties that they encounter and the level of support that they need. Some common difficulties are as follows:

1) Learning

Children with Borderline intellectual ability may learn more slowly than typical developing children due to limitations in their cognitive ability. They may have





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difficulties in understanding abstract concepts, organizing new materials, as well as absorbing and applying learned knowledge (Shaw, 2010). Some children may also have difficulties in memory and executive functioning (Peltopuro et al., 2014), which in turn affect their concentration and self-control. Some may have difficulties in learning written languages, like reading and comprehension (Francesco et al., 2014), as well as mathematical concepts (Stefanelli, & Packiam, 2020). As a result, children with Borderline intellectual ability usually have weaker academic performance which may then affect their learning motivation and emotion (Peltopuro et al., 2014) .

2) Social & Behaviour

Some research indicate that children with Borderline Intelligence are weaker in their self-control and social skills, and may exhibit features of hyperactivity and inattention (Hassiotis, 2015). For example, they may find it difficult to understand and respond to social information (Bagilo, 2016; Van Nieuwenhuijzen & Vriens, 2012), which affects their problem solving skill. Some may be overly tolerant or timid as they are afraid of expressing themselves, while some may behave aggressively in face of interpersonal conflicts because of weak self-control. Therefore, additional support in peer relationship and friendship-building are considered necessary for them (Chandra, Pradeep, & Arul, 2018).

3) Emotion

As children with Borderline Intelligence encounter more difficulties in their learning and social relationship, they may suffer from low self-esteem and self-confidence, as well as display more frequent temper tantrums and unstable emotions. Some studies also indicate that those children are more likely to have depression and anxiety problems (Peltopuro et al., 2014). In addition, they may be afraid of going to school





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because of the academic demands and stress, as well as possible bullying from peers (Ales, Rappo, & Pepi, 2015).

4) Daily Living

Children with Borderline Intelligence usually have weaker performance in memory and executive functioning; some may also have gross-motor and fine-motor coordination difficulties. They may need more guidance and support in daily living, such as self-care, daily routines, time management, organization and arrangement of activities, as well as setting long-term goals (Peltopuro et al., 2014).

How can parents help?

Although children with Borderline Intelligence may encounter more difficulties in the areas of learning, social, emotional, and daily living, research shows that parents can have positive impacts on their children's performance if they have a thorough understanding of their children's individual characteristics as well as strengths and weaknesses, hold a positive attitude and have realistic expectations on them, teach skills approximate to their needs at different stages, and nourish a loving and warm parent-child relationship. (Fenning et al., 2014). Parents should also adjust their teaching methods and parenting skills based on their children's individual needs in order to best support them.

1) Learning

Children with Borderline Intelligence often have difficulties in learning abstract concepts, as well as analyzing and integrating taught materials. It is therefore necessary to be concrete and to use interesting, daily life examples when teaching them. They should be given more time and opportunities to learn and practice the





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materials. Depending on the child's needs, individual coaching and repeated explanations are also effective strategies to facilitate learning. To teach children to organize and consolidate new information, organization and memory strategies can be explained directly in simple ways. Using multi-sensory methods, such as visual cues, to highlight the important points is also recommended. More importantly, parents have to be calm and patient during the teaching process. If the child still fails to grasp certain concepts after repeated explanations, a break should be given. It is worthwhile to consider reviewing the simpler or previously learnt concepts before more complex materials are taught, as a way to strengthen the foundations of learning.

2) Social & Behaviour

It is crucial to note the child's social communication skills, behavioral patterns, peer relationship, whether they experience bullying, and how they resolve problems when facing with difficulties. Patience and understanding are essential when listening to the child's difficulties. This way, parents can provide guidance that are specifically tailored to their problems and needs. For example, if a child is often bullied by others because he is overly tolerant, parents can teach him to be more assertive in expressing his needs and demonstrate ways of protecting oneself through discussion and role play.

If a child has difficulties understanding the intention and feelings of others, parents may consider to explicitly teach and provide demonstrations or prompts on how other people think or feel. Arranging social gatherings for them to learn and practice through games and peer interactions is also helpful.

If the child is weak in social skills, he can be taught concrete steps of problem-solving :

- 1) identifying the problem,
- 2) listing out possible ways of solving the problem,
- 3) examining the feasibility and possible obstacles of different possibilities,
- 4) choosing





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one of the ways and trying to execute it, 5) evaluating the result after execution. When the child learns the problem-solving steps repeatedly, he will be able to cope with his difficulties in a more flexible and effective manner.

If a child is weak in self-control, parents can consider developing some visual or verbal cues with him through discussions as a way of enhancing self-control. For example, “stop and think before acting”; “complete the task at hand before moving on to another”.

3) Emotion

A healthy and stable mental state can facilitate children’s learning, social, and daily performance. Both positive and negative emotions are important signals to let parents understand their children’s needs and difficulties. As a result, it is important to have an open attitude and to encourage children to share their emotions. Children will be more willing to share their emotions if parents can listen patiently. The process of sharing is a good opportunity for children to learn to express and regulate their emotions, as well as to learn to solve problems. Parents can also teach children how to regulate their emotions and reduce possible emotional disturbances by sharing their own experiences.

4) Parent-School collaboration

Collaboration with the school is indispensable in supporting children with Borderline Intelligence. Parents may initiate communication and establish a mutual trusting relationship with the school so as to come up with the best arrangements according to the children’s individual needs in learning, social, and emotional support. In Hong Kong, the Education Bureau encourages the schools to support children with special needs through the Whole School Approach and Three-tier Support Model. Based on





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the condition of the children, support strategies may include optimizing teaching in the classroom and arranging for remedial support, such as after-school training. If a child's difficulties are prominent and have persisted over a period of time, an Individual Education Plan could be devised to accommodate specific needs.

5) Acceptance and Encouragement

Each child is unique. The acceptance and encouragement of parents are the cornerstones of helping children thrive. Having a positive attitude and paying attention to the children's interests, developing their abilities across different aspects, enhancing their potentials, establishing a positive self-image, as well as letting them grow and learn in a family with warmth and love are all important aspects of supporting the children.

6) Self-care on mental wellbeing

When taking care of their children, parents may experience different levels of stress; they may need to adjust their expectations on children and themselves from time to time (Kleefman, Reijneveld, & Jansen, 2015). More importantly, parents should not neglect their own emotions and mental health. It is important to have timely and sufficient rest. Seeking help from the school, related agencies, and professionals should be considered when needed.





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