



### **Farewell to PAMS (Parent Assessment Manual)?**

- 1) Since 1988 the automatic go to form of parenting assessment for any parent with a learning disability/difficulty has been a PAMS assessment (short for “Parent Assessment Manual”). It is no doubt a form of assessment that anybody working within Child Protection and/or the Family Court system will have come across at some stage.
- 2) However, in 2016, another form of assessment targeted towards assessing vulnerable parents was created by Sarah Lowe – “ParentAssess”. [Sarah](#) is a social worker with over 40 years experience in the field, with experience working in residential care settings, in-house in a Local Authority setting and, for over 20 years, as an independent social worker. Much of her work has focused around working with adults and parents who have learning disabilities.
- 3) ParentAssess first began emerging in the Family Courts in 2017 and, since that time, has become more and more commonplace as an alternative form of assessment for vulnerable parents involved with Children’s Services. It is recognised by the Courts and the Legal Aid Agency as a clear alternative model of assessment. It was formally named in the Department of Health’s [“Good practice guidance on working with parents with a learning disability” \(July 2021\)](#) as a “specialist parenting assessment” and a recommended assessment tool for parents with additional needs.

### **What is ParentAssess?**

- 4) ParentAssess is a framework available for social work practitioners to use when assessing parents who may have learning disabilities or some form of additional need in the course of Children Act proceedings (or pre-proceedings). It addresses the emotional and practical aspects of parenting. It aims to identify both the strengths and the concerns within a parent’s ability, albeit, primarily, it is considered to be a “strengths based” framework with the focus of the methodology being on the parents’ specific needs and what might aid them to help the parent build on those strengths.

- 5) The framework itself is based on the [Department of Health's practice guidance for "Assessing Children in Need and their Families" \(2000\)](#) and draws upon the principles from the judgment of the former President of the Family Division (Munby P) in [Re D \(Adoption\) \(No.3\) \[2016\] EWFC 1](#) (which, in turn, expressly approved and appended the judgment of Gillen J in [Re G and A \(Care Order: Freeing Order: Parents with a Learning Disability\) \[2006\] NIFam 8](#) – those same principles have been appended to the end of this article for reference).
- 6) The assessment, whilst holistically looking at all the relevant parenting domains, focuses on 5 main areas:
  - a. The child/children's experience of parenting;
  - b. The functioning of the parent;
  - c. The parent's daily living skills;
  - d. Any specific issues identified (i.e. substance misuse, domestic abuse etc);
  - e. The support that could be implemented;
- 7) ParentAssess avoids using the "cartoons" that are often used in PAMS assessments and, rather, makes use of creative and interactive tools with a view to helping the parent feel more able to work positively with the assessor, such as:
  - a. A knowledge and confidence booklet;
  - b. A minimum of two observations of the parent with the child/children to see if they can implement the knowledge being discussed during the assessment;
  - c. Videos as a teaching tool, if appropriate;
  - d. Baby cue cards (with actual photos of babies, rather than cartoons, so the parents can relate);
  - e. Feelings chart based on the child/children's feelings;
- 8) Ultimately though, all of the tools are adaptable to the parent's specific needs.
- 9) Those who have come across ParentAssess will be familiar with the "traffic light system". For those who are not, throughout the assessment the parent and the assessor consider each of the respective parenting domains that fall to be assessed across a 3 tier, colour coded "traffic light system", where:
  - a. **Red** means significant concerns;
  - b. **Amber** means some concerns / monitoring needed;
  - c. **Green** means no concerns;
- 10) This system is used by both the parents and the assessor during the assessment as a method by which the parent can express their views (i.e. where the parent thinks they're at) and by which the assessor can keep the parent updated with how they are doing. ParentAssess aims to keep parents informed throughout the process so they can understand which areas of parenting they need to focus on as the assessment progresses.
- 11) Once the assessment is complete the outcome is explained using the same traffic light system, as seen below.

|                         | Green | Yellow | Red    | White  | Father |
|-------------------------|-------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Child's development     | Green | Yellow | Red    | Green  | Yellow |
| Child's hygiene         | Green | Yellow | Red    | Green  | Yellow |
| Child's education       | Green | Green  | Yellow | Green  | Yellow |
| Child's play            | Green | Green  | Yellow | White  | White  |
| Child's routine         | Green | Yellow | Red    | Green  | Yellow |
| Child's diet            | Green | Yellow | Red    | Green  | Yellow |
| Child's home            | Green | Yellow | Red    | Yellow | Yellow |
| Child's emotional needs | Green | Green  | Red    | Green  | Green  |
| Attachment              | Green | Green  | Red    | Green  | Red    |

12) At the conclusion of the assessment, as well as a full report and the traffic light outcome (as seen above) for the Court and the professionals' benefit, a separate short "parent friendly" report is provided to the parents. This is no longer than 2 pages, written in clear language and succinctly explains to the parent:

- a. What the parent does well;
- b. What the assessor is worried about;
- c. What the assessor is going to tell the Court;

13) Whilst each assessment can be tailored to each parent's individual needs there are some core, key principles that ultimately underpin the ethos of the process and which practitioners can expect to consistently see across all "ParentAssess" assessments:

- a. The parents will be given the strengths and concern summaries at the earliest point possible in the assessment so they are clear what they need to work on;
- b. There will be at least 2, but preferably 3, parent/child observations, with clear feedback being given to the parent thereafter;
- c. The parent's ability to learn and use adaptive strategies as part of the overall assessment;
- d. The provision of the separate short parent report written in clear language;
- e. The provision of a separate outcome table and assessor's summary;
- f. The tables must be printed in colour so they have meaning to the parent;

#### Who is it for?

14) As mentioned right at the outset, ParentAssess is an assessment option for parents with learning disabilities – an alternative to PAMS. However, ParentAssess is not just limited to parents with learning disabilities.

15) Whilst there will no doubt be legal questions of necessity/proportionality in any given case, the fact is that ParentAssess' flexible, tailored approach means that it is suitable for an assessment of any parent. For instance, even if a parent does not have a learning disability, it may be that there are additional issues in the case which mean their assessment needs to

be tailored and specifically adapted so that the ParentAssess approach, as opposed to a “standard” Parenting Assessment, may be more appropriate. Those issues may include matters that we in the family court system come across regularly, such as:

- a. Mental health;
- b. Trauma;
- c. Exploitation
- d. Domestic abuse;
- e. Substance misuse;

16) ParentAssess is also a suitable framework for parents with autism. It is important, of course, to differentiate as autism is a condition as opposed to a learning disability. The flexibility of the framework is what makes it suitable for such parents.

17) As mentioned above, the focus within the methodology is on the parent’s specific needs and what can aid them to build on their strengths. As such, ParentAssess can often be suitable for cases with a cultural element as the assessor’s aim at the start will be to listen carefully and understand the parent’s culture and viewpoint as much as possible whilst making use of the aforementioned interactive tools to enable the parent to get those aspects across as fully as they need to.

18) ParentAssess is not limited to ongoing court proceedings but, rather, can be used in pre-proceedings or, even, as part of a pre-birth assessment.

#### How long should it take?

19) There is no hard and fast answer to this question. We tend to think that most “standard” parenting assessments will take somewhere between 8-10 weeks. The key thread running through this article though has been the ParentAssess is not a “one size fits all” approach and, indeed, each assessment is tailored around the specific needs of the parent in the case. The overall time that is likely to be required will no doubt be informed by:

- a. The parent’s individual cognitive issues;
- b. Any other matters which may impact on the parent’s ability to process information;
- c. The complexity of the issues;
- d. The nature of the risk(s);
- e. The number of children;
- f. The size of the parent’s support network;
- g. Any cultural or diversity issues;
- h. Whether any adjustments need to be made i.e. the use of an interpreter, the use of a lay advocate etc;

20) With that in mind it is likely to be unrealistic to expect a ParentAssess to be “expedited” in a space of 4-6 weeks. Indeed, any suggestion of such a service should likely be approached with caution. The ethos behind ParentAssess is grounded in gaining an understanding of the parent’s individual needs, adapting the assessment to those needs and given the parent the opportunity to demonstrate progress throughout the process. The concept of an “expedited” assessment would seem to run wholly contrary to those principles.

#### Who is using it?

21) At the time of writing it is understood that over 1,500 social workers in England and Wales have been trained in ParentAssess. This includes both ISWs and in-house social workers. A number of well-known and reputable expert providers suggest that their ISWs are now able to offer ParentAssess assessments as a service. Furthermore, there are at least 100 Local Authorities who have members of staff trained in ParentAssess. There are also a number of residential assessment units who are now able to offer ParentAssess assessments in-house.

#### Other matters to note

- 22) One point to be wary of when considering the instruction of an ISW specialising in ParentAssess is that of costs. The [Legal Aid Agency Guidance on the Remuneration of Expert Witnesses](#) currently allows 37 hours for a sole parent with learning difficulties to be assessed, rising to 52 hours in the case of two parents. That issue is likely compounded even further in the case of a ParentAssess assessment that is being conducted on parent(s) who do not have learning difficulties – the Legal Aid Agency may very well view that as an “ISW Assessment” with the allowance only therefore being 30 hours for a single parent and 40 hours for two parents. Given the tailored approach taken in a ParentAssess assessment, and the key principles outlined above (particularly the need to observe 2-3 sessions between the parent and the child/ren) it seems likely that ParentAssess assessments will often fall outside those rates. Those considering the instruction of an ISW for a ParentAssess assessment will need to be alive to this issue and consider making a timely application for prior authority and/or invite the Local Authority to meet any shortfall that is likely to arise.
- 23) There are a number of other helpful articles providing further insights into the approach of ParentAssess and the standards that can be expected in such assessments. There are also regular training courses/workshops available for, not only potential assessors, but also for supervising managers, support workers, family time observers and lawyers involved in the family court system. More information in relation to this can be found on the ParentAssess website (<https://www.parentassess.com>).

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**Annex – Extract from the judgment of Gillen J in Re G and A (Care Order: Freeing Order: Parents with a Learning Disability) [2006] NIFam 8 as expressly approved by Munby P in Re D (Adoption) (No.3) [2016] EWFC 1**

- (1) An increasing number of adults with learning difficulties are becoming parents. The Baring Foundation report records that whilst there are no precise figures on the number of parents with learning difficulties in the population, the most recent statistics come from the First National Survey of Adults with Learning Difficulties in England, where one in fifteen of the adults interviewed had children. Whatever the figure it is generally recognised that their number is steadily rising and that they represent a sizable population whose special needs require to be adequately addressed. The Baring Foundation report refers to national policy in England and Scotland committing government to "supporting parents with learning disabilities in order to help them, wherever possible, to ensure their children gain maximum life chance benefits." Nonetheless the courts must be aware that surveys show that parents with learning disabilities are apparently more likely than other parents to have their children removed and permanently placed outside the family home. In multidisciplinary jurisdiction such as the Family Division, it is important that the court is aware of such reports at least for the purposes of comment. It is important to appreciate these currents because the Children Order (Northern Ireland) 1995 places an emphasis on supporting the family so that children can remain with them and obligations under disability discrimination legislation make public services accessible to disabled people (including parents with learning difficulties). Moreover the advent of the Human Rights Act 1998 plays an important role in highlighting the need to ensure the rights of such parents under Articles 6 and 8 of the European Convention of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms ("the Convention").
- (2) People with a learning disability are individuals first and foremost and each has a right to be treated as an equal citizen. Government policy emphasises the importance of people with a learning disability being supported to be fully engaged playing a role in civic society and their ability to exercise their rights and responsibilities needs to be strengthened. They are valued citizens and must be enabled to use mainstream services and be fully included in the life of the community as far as possible. The courts must reflect this and recognise their need for individual support and the necessity to remove barriers to inclusion that create disadvantage and discrimination. To that extent courts must take all steps possible to ensure that people with a learning disability are able to actively participate in decisions affecting their lives. They must be supported in ways that take account of their individual needs and to help them to be as independent as possible.
- (3) It is important that a court approaches these cases with a recognition of the possible barriers to the provision of appropriate support to parents including negative or stereotypical attitudes about parents with learning difficulties possibly on the part of staff in some Trusts or services. An extract from the Baring Foundation report provides a cautionary warning:

"For example, it was felt that some staff in services whose primary focus was not learning difficulties (eg in children and family teams) did not fully understand the impact of having learning difficulties on individual parents' lives; had fixed ideas about what would happen to the children of parents with learning difficulties and wanted an outcome that did not involve any risks (which might mean them being

placed away from their family); expected parents with learning difficulties to be 'perfect parents' and had extremely high expectations of them. Different professionals often had different concepts of parenting against which parents were assessed. Parents' disengagement with services, because they felt that staff had a negative view of them and 'wanted to take their children away' was also an issue, as were referrals to support services which were too late to be of optimum use to the family – often because workers lacked awareness of parents' learning difficulties or because parents had not previously been known to services".

- (4) This court fully accepts that parents with learning difficulties can often be "good enough" parents when provided with the ongoing emotional and practical support they need. The concept of "parenting with support" must underpin the way in which the courts and professionals approach wherever possible parents with learning difficulties. The extended family can be a valuable source of support to parents and their children and the courts must anxiously scrutinize the possibilities of assistance from the extended family. Moreover the court must also view multi-agency working as critical if parents are to be supported effectively. Courts should carefully examine the approach of Trusts to ensure this is being done in appropriate cases. In particular judges must make absolutely certain that parents with learning difficulties are not at risk of having their parental responsibilities terminated on the basis of evidence that would not hold up against normal parents. Their competences must not be judged against stricter criteria or harsher standards than other parents. Courts must be acutely aware of the distinction between direct and indirect discrimination and how this might be relevant to the treatment of parents with learning difficulties in care proceedings. In particular careful consideration must be given to the assessment phase by a Trust and in the application of the threshold test.
- (5) Parents must be advised by social workers about their legal rights, where to obtain advice, how to find a solicitor and what help might be available to them once a decision has been taken to pursue a care application. Too narrow a focus must not be placed exclusively on the child's welfare with an accompanying failure to address parents' needs arising from their disability which might impact adversely on their parenting capacity. Parents with learning disabilities should be advised of the possibility of using an advocate during their case eg from the Trust itself or from Mencap and clear explanations and easy to understand information about the process and the roles of the different professionals involved must be disclosed to them periodically. Written information should be provided to such parents to enable them to consider these matters at leisure and with their advocate or advisers. Moreover Trusts should give careful consideration to providing child protection training to staff working in services for adults with learning disabilities. Similarly those in children's services need training about adults with learning disabilities. In other words there is a strong case to be made for new guidelines to be drawn up for such services working together with a joint training programme. I endorse entirely the views of the Guardian ad Litem in this case when she responded to the "Finding the Right Support" paper by stating:

"As far as I am aware there are no 'family teams' in the Trusts designated to support parents with a learning disability. In my opinion this would be a positive development. The research also suggests that

a learning disability specialist could be designated to work within family and childcare teams and a child protection specialist could be designated to work within learning disability teams. If such professionals were to be placed in the Trusts in Northern Ireland they could be involved in drawing up a protocol for joint working, developing guidelines, developing expertise in research, awareness of resources and stimulating positive practice. They could also assist in developing a province-wide forum that could build links between the Trusts, the voluntary sector and the national and international learning disability community."

- (6) The court must also take steps to ensure there are no barriers to justice within the process itself. Judges and magistrates must recognise that parents with learning disabilities need extra time with solicitors so that everything can be carefully explained to them. Advocates can play a vital role in supporting parents with learning difficulties particularly when they are involved in child protection or judicial processes. In the current case, the court periodically stopped (approximately after each hour), to allow the Mencap representative to explain to the parents what was happening and to ensure that an appropriate attention span was not being exceeded. The process necessarily has to be slowed down to give such parents a better chance to understand and participate. This approach should be echoed throughout the whole system including LAC reviews. All parts of the Family justice system should take care as to the language and vocabulary that is utilised. In this case I was concerned that some of the letters written by the Trust may not have been understood by these parents although it was clear to me that exhortations had been given to the parents to obtain the assistance of their solicitors (which in fact was done). In terms therefore the courts must be careful to ensure that the supposed inability of parents to change might itself be an artefact of professionals ineffectiveness in engaging with the parents in appropriate terms. Courts must not rush to judge, but must gather all the evidence within a reasonable time before making a determination. Steps must be taken to ensure that parents have a meaningful and informed access to reports, time to discuss the reports and an opportunity to put forward their own views. Not only should the hearing involve special measures, including a break in sessions, but it might also include permission that parents need not enter the court until they are required if they so wish. Moreover the judges should be scrupulous to ensure that an opportunity is given to parents with learning disabilities to indicate to the court that something is occurring which is beyond their comprehension and that measures must be taken to deal with that. Steps should also be taken throughout the process to ensure that parents with learning disabilities are not overwhelmed by unnecessarily large numbers of persons being present at meetings or hearings.
- (7) Children of parents with learning difficulties often do not enter the child protection system as the result of abuse by their parents. More regularly the prevailing concerns centre on a perceived risk of neglect, both as the result of the parents' intellectual impairments, and the impact of the social and economic deprivation commonly faced by adults with learning difficulties. It is in this context that a shift must be made from the old assumption that adults with learning difficulties could not parent to a process of questioning why appropriate levels of support are not provided to them so that they can parent successfully and why their children should often be taken into care. At its simplest, this means a court carefully inquiring as to what support is needed to enable parents to show whether or not they can become good enough parents rather than automatically



assuming that they are destined to fail. The concept of "parenting with support" must move from the margins to the mainstream in court determinations.

- (8) Courts must ensure that careful consideration is given to ensuring that any decision or judgment is fully explained to such parents. In this case I caused a copy of the judgment to be provided to the parties at least one day before I handed it down to facilitate it being explained in detail before the attendance at court where confusion and consternation could be caused by a lengthy judgment being read which the parents could not follow at the time.