

## COMPLEX LEARNING DIFFICULTIES AND DISABILITIES RESEARCH PROJECT (CLDD)

### PREMATURE BIRTH

#### What is premature birth?

Prematurity of birth is defined either in terms of how long the baby was in the womb (gestational age – GA) or birth weight (BW). Table 1 below shows the various degrees of prematurity.

Degree of prematurity	Gestational age	Birth weight
Full-term	Over 37 weeks	
Preterm	Less than 37 weeks	
Very preterm	Less than 32 weeks	
Extremely preterm	Less than 28 weeks	
Normal birth weight (NBW)		Greater than 2,500g
Low birth weight (LBW)		Less than 2,500g
Very low birth weight (VLBW)		Less than 1,500g
Extremely low birth weight (ELBW)		Less than 1,000g

#### Implications for teaching and learning

Although most infants who are premature are born at 35–37 weeks without any significant long term challenges, the more premature they are, the greater the risk that they will display difficulties in some or all of the following areas:

- Children who have learning difficulties as a result of prematurity may display lower ability than their full term peers, leading to lower achievement
- general learning difficulties
- specific learning difficulties (which means having difficulty in some areas of learning but not others)
- behavioural difficulties
- difficulties with memory
- difficulties with planning ahead and organising their thoughts
- difficulties with numeracy
- difficulties with reading and with written language
- difficulties with receptive language (understanding what is said)
- hearing, visual or multisensory impairments ranging from mild to severe

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- higher risk of being diagnosed with cerebral palsy
- higher risk of being diagnosed with behaviour, emotional and social difficulties (BESD) or ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder)
- delayed physical development, affecting gross and fine motor skills (eg clumsiness, poor handwriting)
- hyperactivity, anxiety, depression and being more likely to be bullied
- health problems
- difficulties with daily living skills such as eating and toileting

This means that they are at risk of not doing as well at school. Extremely low birth weight infants may have many areas of difficulty.

#### Supporting preterm birth learners

Although every child will be different, the following factors need to be in place in order to support these students:

- 1 Appropriate resources to meet learners' unique and complex needs. Learning is mediated through social relationships. Any educational intervention needs to respond to where the child is both developmentally and socially.
- 2 Training for staff to recognise the possible learning disabilities and difficulties associated with preterm birth and to be able to give support.
- 3 Support from those who have specialist knowledge, such as educational psychologists (EPs), SENCOs, Local Authority SEN Advisory and Support Teams, Outreach Services from special schools or other specialist provision. Professionals will necessarily need to work together to develop a transdisciplinary approach when both assessing and planning the child's individual learning pathways. It is important to treat the child holistically, and reduce the possibility of fragmented intervention.
- 4 Support and guidance for families in helping to meet the needs of their complex children.