

The importance of being Dad: services working with families should recognise and support all fathers, including those with learning difficulties.

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About the research

Fathers are important. They can play a crucial role in a child's life. But fathers are often overlooked, especially when they have learning difficulties.

The term learning difficulties is used here to include parents with a diagnosed learning disability and those without, who often don't meet the threshold for support from the adult learning disabilities team, but who struggle with everyday life and ensuring the welfare of their children.

Parents with learning difficulties are over-represented in the child protection system, typically due to concerns regarding neglect by omission. In addition to having a learning difficulty, they often face a wide range of barriers to ensuring positive outcomes for their children.

The 'Fathers to Fathers' project aimed to find out from fathers with learning difficulties what it meant to them to be a dad, what their experiences had been, and what advice they would give to other fathers with learning difficulties.

This briefing highlights the need for services working with families to recognise and build on the value of fathers as good male role models, and to support and work with them. This includes fathers who have learning difficulties.

Implications for policy and practice

- Assumptions as to the primary carer can be ill-founded, or circumstances can change. Both parents should therefore be treated equally as principal carers, wherever possible.
- Professionals should build and maintain mutually trusting relationships with fathers, as well as mothers.
- As with mothers with learning difficulties, fathers also need early, pro-active, tailored support. Local authorities should refer to their Think Family framework¹ to ensure that they are aware of both parents' support needs.
- Adult services should work productively with children's services to ensure a human rights compliant, effective, whole-family approach.
- Fathers should be specifically addressed in policies, as well as mothers, rather than simply 'parents', which is commonly understood to mean mothers.
- Referral and recording systems should include information about fathers, including fathers' personal contact details.

¹ The Think Family concept promotes a whole-family approach; coordinating services, providing joined up support, taking into account family circumstances and responsibilities, building on family strengths, and helping them to develop their capabilities.

Key findings

Fathers in the study expressed a powerful sense of responsibility and motivation for raising their children, yet they felt excluded by services that tended to focus on providing practical and emotional support to mothers.

“And I felt like, what do I do? Am I a spare part or what?”

Fathers wanted to be fully involved in raising their children, even if the relationship with their partner had broken down. They had been responsible for bathing, feeding, changing nappies, dressing, setting boundaries, being at the school gates and providing emotional support.

Fathers reported feeling under constant observation and being intimidated by professional assessments. They also felt that they had even more to prove than mothers.

“I felt we were in a goldfish bowl. Always being watched. We were always worried about something going wrong.”

Fathers said it was hard for them to contact each other to talk about their lives and to share their experiences. They very much wanted to have local fathers' groups, for face-to-face contact, so that they could benefit from other fathers' experiences, knowledge and skills.

They particularly needed support with paperwork, such as obtaining birth certificates, reading letters from school, or about benefits, or dealing with bills.

“Being a father with learning disabilities is hard, and it's difficult to get people to listen to you and take you seriously.”

Further information

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Working with groups of fathers, advice 'About being a dad – for dads, by dads' was produced in leaflet form, including an Easy Read version, and in audio form on YouTube. <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/sps/wtpn/resources/>

Dugdale, D. and Symonds, J. (2018) Fathers with learning disabilities: experiences of fatherhood and of adult social care services. Available at www.bristol.ac.uk

Working Together with Parents Network (www.wtpn.co.uk) - Supports professionals working with parents with learning difficulties and learning disabilities, and their children.

The 2016 Working Together with Parents Network (WTPN) update of the DoH/DfES Good practice guidance on working with parents with a learning disability (2007) <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/sps/wtpn/policyessentials/>

RiP/RiPfa (2018) Supporting parents who have learning disabilities - Strategic briefing for service leads and commissioners: <https://www.rip.org.uk/resources/publications/strategic-briefings/supporting-parents-who-have-learning-disabilities-strategic-briefing-2018/>

The President's Guidance: Family proceedings: Parents with a Learning Disability. <https://www.judiciary.uk/publications/family-proceedings-parents-with-a-learning-disability/>

The Scottish government has shown legislative and policy leadership on supported parenting <https://www2.gov.scot/Resource/0051/00511327.pdf> and https://www.scl.d.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Supported_Parenting_web.pdf

Tarleton, Howarth and Ward (2006) Finding the Right support. Bristol; Norah Fry Research Centre, University of Bristol. <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/sps/migrated/documents/rightsupport.pdf>

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