A Stigmatised System: Parents with Learning Disabilities and the Risk of Child Removal

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Stigma, Parenting and the Risk of Child Removal

Parents with learning disabilities and difficulties face a deeply stigmatising child welfare system – one in which they are disproportionately likely to lose their children. Despite ongoing efforts to promote equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in the UK policy and practice, these parents often remain invisible in discussions about parenting, support and state intervention.

Learning Disability Week, which takes place in the third week of June. The lives of people with learning disabilities are often overlooked and hidden in the shadows of society. This year's theme – "Do you see me?" – challenges society to acknowledge and engage with these often-overlooked lives. The call is especially urgent for parents, who face scrutiny, judgment, and systemic disadvantage in child protection and care proceedings.

Before exploring these challenges, it's helpful to clarify two terms that are often confused in policy and academic literature: learning disabilities and learning difficulties:

- A learning disability (sometimes called an intellectual disability) includes the presence of a significantly reduced ability to understand new or complex information and learn new skills, with a reduced ability to cope independently, which began before adulthood and has a lasting effect on development.
- In contrast, a learning difficulty refers to a reduced intellectual ability in a specific form of learning. It includes conditions such as dyslexia (affecting reading), dyspraxia (affecting physical coordination) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). A person with a learning disability may also have one or more learning difficulties.

Understanding these distinctions is essential when considering how the child welfare system responds – or fails to respond – to the needs and rights of parents with these diagnoses.

What do we know about parents with learning disabilities?

Although the number of parents with learning disabilities and difficulties is thought to be increasing – reflecting greater recognition of their rights – the exact figures remain unknown. Estimates suggest that around 1–2% of births in England are to parents with a learning difficulty. Research in this area remains limited, and where studies do exist, they tend to focus more on women. This reflects traditional gendered norms in which mothers are typically viewed as the primary caregivers. Consequently, those with learning disabilities in mothering roles are more likely to engage with social services and to be recognised by the system than their male counterparts

Many parents with learning disabilities remain **unidentified by services until late in the process**. A recent study from the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (NFJO) found that in approximately 75% of reviewed cases, learning disabilities or difficulties were only recognised during care proceedings. This late identification suggests that appropriate parenting support and tailored assessments were likely missing beforehand.

As a result, some parents may not fully understand the care proceedings process – what was expected of them, or the implications of professional decisions. Outcomes in these cases are often troubling. NFJO research showed that one in three parents at risk of having their babies removed had a learning disability or difficulty. Eighty-one percent were referred to children's social care during pregnancy, most in the first and second trimesters.

Barriers to Parenting and Support

Parents with learning disabilities often face a combination of socioeconomic disadvantage, **environmental adversity, poor mental health**, and **limited intergenerational support**. These challenges increase the likelihood of child removal and compound the difficulty of parenting in already complex circumstances.

In addition, many of these parents experience social isolation and exclusion, with limited informal support from family or friends. This lack of support increases their reliance on professional services, which often fail to provide adequate or appropriate assistance – largely due to ineffective and poorly tailored communication between parents and social care professionals. Too often, their needs are minimised or ignored altogether. This failure is not neutral; it reflects persistent stigmatised attitudes toward their role as parents. Such attitudes are frequently rooted in assumptions that parents with learning disabilities and difficulties are inherently incapable, rather than acknowledging the importance of support and adaptation.

Stigma and a System That Implements it: "We want to be parents like everybody else"

Parents with learning disabilities and difficulties are often stigmatised because of the "disabled" label – judged not by what they can do, but by what others assume they cannot. Many report being assessed primarily through the lens of their diagnosis, rather than as individuals or parents.

At the root of this stigma is a broader societal view that people with learning disabilities are childlike, asexual or incapable of safe parenting. These assumptions frequently lead to disapproval from both professionals and wider social networks, particularly when parents disclose a pregnancy. As one participant in a study by Franklin et al., shared:

> *"The doctors didn't really want me to have the baby, with me having a learning disability."*

Such discouragements are exacerbated if mothers are inexperienced. A study by Gould and Dodd quoted one of their participants' words:

> *"…that's when it all started going wrong, when she said, well you know, you're quite young, you being a first-time mum we don't think he's safe in your hands."*
>
> *"…instead of giving me negative she could have given me positive. "Oh, he's going to be taken away from you no matter what you do", that didn't help me."*

Despite this stigma, many parents with learning disabilities and difficulties actively seek support. Studies show that are often aware of their needs, demonstrating willingness to work with services, and view asking for help as a sign of strength. Yet, instead of being encouraged, they frequently report feeling criticised and discouraged by professionals.

Research shows that these parents are often placed under exceptional scrutiny. They are expected to prove not only their parenting competence, but also their "worthiness" to be a parent – standards that are rarely applied to parents without learning disabilities and are not always clearly explained. Many do not fully understand the expectations placed on them during parenting assessments, or even that they are being assessed. As a result, when their children are removed, parents are left confused, frustrated, and betrayed feeling they did everything asked of them, yet were still judged as not enough.

A System That Undermines Trust

These experiences reflect a system that holds an ableist and stigmatised view of parenting. Parents' voices are too often silenced or dismissed by professionals, despite the fact that these professionals are frequently their only source of support due to social isolation.

Parents described feeling tricked or misled, of believing the system was there to help, only to experience judgment and loss. One especially troubling finding is that when a parent with a learning disability is in a relationship with a partner who does not have one, professionals tend to assume that partner is more competent – even in cases involving domestic abuse.

This result is a system that may ignore the vulnerabilities and risks faced by the parent themselves – such as mental health challenges or substance use – and instead focus narrowly on the perceived "risk" posed by the disability itself.

In short, instead of building trust, the system often undermines it. It assumes that parents with learning disabilities and difficulties are not "good enough," and too often moves to remove children rather than support families. This climate of surveillance discourages parents from seeking help and erodes the possibility of meaningful, supportive engagement.

To Listen, To Value, To Include

A fundamental issue remains: people with learning disability are too often seen only the lens of what they cannot do, rather than who they are. In a society built around "non-disabled" norms, this leads to exclusion and misunderstanding.

For parents with learning disabilities, stigma around their "parenting abilities" – and even whether they *should* be parents at all – only deepens the challenges they already face. But these parents are not passive. They actively embrace their role, advocate for their rights, and seek to be seen as capable, committed caregivers. They want to be trusted, not judged – valued as parents, not defined by their diagnosis.

Learning Disability Week is a moment to reflect on how we, as professionals, institutions, and communities, can better support these families. Rather than reinforcing a system that judges and disempowers, we must build one that listens to, values and includes parents with learning disabilities.

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