**Practice Point: Facts and Stereotypes about Children of Parents with Intellectual Disabilities**

This information sheet presents evidence from the international literature on the current state of knowledge about the children of parents with intellectual disabilities. This literature is mostly quite recent and as yet rather underdeveloped. Over the next decade it would be expected that this literature will expand and there will be an increasing number of sound empirical studies to add to the knowledge base about the lives of children of parents with intellectual disabilities.

The information sheet is organised around current general beliefs and stereotypes held about parents with intellectual disabilities and their children. Stereotypes are built on assumptions not evidence. In this information sheet we provide a brief statement of the evidence, with the reference, for those interested to read the studies from which the evidence is derived.

**Stereotype No. 1**

The children of parents with intellectual disabilities will inevitably be disabled like their parent/s.

**FACT**

Overall, there is substantial variation in developmental outcomes for children of parents with intellectual disability. Some studies report high rates of developmental delay due to deficits in mother-child interactions and the level of stimulation in the home environment\(^1\)\(^-\)\(^3\). Other studies indicate that inherited conditions and medical issues may explain developmental delay observed in young children of parents with intellectual disabilities\(^2\)\(^,\)\(^4\). The effect of environmental factors, such as low socio-economic status and social isolation, on parenting practices is also believed to contribute to developmental delay in these children\(^5\)\(^,\)\(^6\).
Stereotype No. 2

Children of parents with intellectual disabilities grow up in single parent families, usually with their mothers.

**FACT**

Most previous studies of parents with intellectual disabilities have only included mothers, not fathers, and frequently report high proportions of single mothers in their samples\(^2,5,7-12\). However, there are no prevalence studies on actual rates of single parenthood for mothers with intellectual disabilities, so we don’t know if mothers are usually included in studies because they are more convenient to access for research than fathers or if there are actually a large proportion of single mothers with intellectual disability in the community.

Stereotype No. 3

Children of parents with intellectual disabilities live in socio-economically disadvantaged and socially isolated families.

**FACT**

Children of parents with intellectual disabilities are more likely to be from low socio-economic backgrounds because people with disabilities, including those who become parents, are likely to live in poverty\(^13\). Mothers with intellectual disabilities are among the most socially isolated mothers in the community\(^14,15\) so their children are also likely to be socially isolated. While, extended family is often involved in the daily care of children when their parents have intellectual disabilities\(^16,17\), some research indicates that parents can overburden their support networks\(^18,19\). This could lead to family estrangement and further social isolation for these families.
Stereotype No. 4

Children of parents with intellectual disabilities will be neglected and abused.

**FACT**

Evidence from four continents demonstrates that children of parents with intellectual disabilities are more likely to be the subject of care proceedings due to alleged abuse and neglect than the children of other parents, including those who have substance abuse issues or mental illness \(^8\), \(^10\), \(^20\), \(^21\). Child protection workers and judicial systems assess parents with intellectual disabilities as incompetent based on IQ rather than taking account of the individual risk and protective factors of each case\(^22\). Having an intellectual disability may impact on parenting skills and can contribute to a range of environmental stressors which are known to be associated with child abuse and neglect in the general population. Studies indicate that children of parents with intellectual disabilities may be at risk of neglect if they are from large families, have a sibling with a disability or are disabled themselves\(^7\). Children whose parents with intellectual disabilities experienced abuse and neglect in their childhood or have mental illness may also be at increased risk of neglect or abuse\(^23\).

Stereotype No. 5

The children of parents with intellectual disabilities would have a better life if they were removed from their parents’ care.

**FACT**

There is no evidence of better outcomes for children of parents with intellectual disabilities who are removed from parental care than those who remain with their parents. It is estimated that two out of every five children of parents with intellectual disabilities are removed from the care of their parent/s\(^20\). Attitudes and beliefs of courts and child protection staff affect the rate of notification as well as court outcomes\(^24\). Child removal is found to occur even in the absence of clear evidence of abuse or neglect\(^25\).
**Stereotype No. 6**

Children of parents with intellectual disabilities feel ashamed of their parent/s with intellectual disabilities.

**FACT**

Two studies which examine the life experiences of adult children of parents with intellectual disabilities indicate that some experienced ambivalent feelings toward their parent/s during childhood 26, 27 but, as adults, most maintained a positive relationship with their parent/s with intellectual disabilities. A study of Danish children of mothers with intellectual disabilities found that experiences of bullying and rejection at school and in the community were common 28. Another study found that children may feel social stigma related to having a mother with an intellectual disability and that this can affect their self-esteem 29.

**Stereotype No. 7**

Children of parents have intellectual disabilities will take on the parenting role, which leads to social problems for them.

**FACT**

Some children with parents with intellectual disabilities may take on additional roles for their parents but there is no evidence that this is counter-productive to the child’s development or that it inevitably threatens their relationship with their parent. One study in the mid 1980s suggests that, if the child is from a family with a small social network and has a high level of responsibility at home, they may rebel against their parent with an intellectual disability and other authority figures, such as teachers 11. This finding, based on the results of a small, qualitative study, has not been confirmed in subsequent studies. Behavioural problems for children with at least average intelligence may increase with age, particularly for boys 12, and if their mother with intellectual disabilities is stressed and isolated 30.
Future Research Needed

1. What is it like growing up with a parent with intellectual disability – how do children understand this and make sense of their world?
2. Are these children more likely to be raised by single mothers with intellectual disabilities?
3. How do children of parents with intellectual disabilities deal with other children’s comments and, possibly, bullying and harassment?
4. How much time does the child then have to be themselves and to be a child?
5. Is there a difference between the perspectives of children of parents with intellectual disabilities according to whether they also have a disability or not?
6. What are the needs of children of parents with intellectual disabilities in families where parents are also traumatised, for example, by childhood abuse or domestic violence, and how might these needs be met?
7. What are the needs of children who are living in situations where parents have little understanding of the need to learn/ to attend school, and how might we meet these?
References


