Readable Research

Research Summarised


What did the researchers do?
The researchers conducted a literature review of 26 published studies that focused on outcomes or life experiences of children of parents with intellectual disability.

Reason for the study
The researchers recognised that a comprehensive review of the literature about children of parents with intellectual disability had not been done. They conducted the review as a first step to inform policy and identify future research about the impact on children, if any, of having a parent with intellectual disability.

What did the researchers find?
The researchers found that there is no consensus that children of parents with an intellectual disability are at increased risk of neglect or developmental delay.

Instead, social factors, such as socioeconomic disadvantage and social isolation, were the more likely predictors of abuse or neglect. The influence of intellectual disability couldn’t be easily disentangled from these social factors.

Children with a parent who experienced abuse or neglect in their own childhood, were also at greater risk of abuse or neglect.

Some earlier studies found higher rates of developmental delay in children of parents with intellectual disability. The researchers reported that more recent evidence suggests that factors such as complications during pregnancy and birth are more common among this group and could explain the developmental delays that were previously thought to be associated with deficits in parenting skills.

The researchers also found that if children of parents with intellectual disability become involved with the child protection system, they are at significant risk of being removed from their parents’ care.

The researchers reported that gender differences have been somewhat neglected. The findings from the small group of studies to examine differences in behavioural difficulties between boys and girls were inconclusive. One study noted boys were
more likely to have behavioural difficulties, but this was not supported by findings from a subsequent study.

The review also reported on studies about the childhood experiences of adult children of parents with intellectual disability. These studies suggest that children face social exclusion and stigma, particularly during school years, which can affect how well they do at school and their wellbeing.

**Study limitations**
The key limitation noted by the researchers is that in many of the studies the participants were families who were already involved in court proceedings or clinical services. The participants were mainly mothers, and there was a high rate of single mothers and parents already experiencing crisis. This means that results are skewed toward those families already under significant stress or whose children are already considered at risk.

Furthermore, most of the studies had small sample sizes and didn’t have a comparison group, so the differences between children of parents with intellectual disability, and compared to children of parents without intellectual disability is poorly understood.

Also, most of the studies were of children under 5, so the findings are limited to young children.

**How could this research be used?**
The researchers conclude that their findings reveal a need for:
1. Longitudinal, population-based research to investigate how children of parents with intellectual disability compare to their peers over time.
2. More research which provides the child perspective of childhood and looks at the long-term consequences of social exclusion, bullying and stigma.

They also suggest that the benefits of personal development and social programs that provide an opportunity to develop healthy peer relationships and positive self-image during adolescence should be examined as one study suggests such programs can compensate for the effects of stigma and improve self-esteem.

**About the researchers**
Susan Collings (susan.collings@sydney.edu.au) is a postgraduate fellow in the Faculty of healthy Sciences at the University of Sydney, Australia, and is the contact person for this literature review.

Gwynnyth Llewellyn is the Professor, Family and Disability Studies and Director, Centre for Disability Research and Policy, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Sydney, Australia.