

# Parental Intellectual Disability and Child Protection: Key Issues

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# Overview

- Why discuss parental intellectual disability
- The project
- Definitions and prevalence
- Parental capacity
- Impacts on parenting: Indicators that increase the risks of abuse and or neglect
- Issues for support services



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# Why discuss parental intellectual disability?

- Parents with intellectual disabilities over-represented in child protection and legal proceedings
- Statistically, parental intellectual disability a risk factor for child protection involvement
- Discrimination, prejudice and lack of support services contribute to the over-representation



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# The project

- Aim: to unpack if parental intellectual disability increases risk of child abuse and neglect
- Method: structural review of literature
- Implications for practice: identify points of intervention to better provide services and support for parents with intellectual disabilities (preventing abuse/neglect)



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# Research reviewed

- The research used for analysis included:
  - ◆ 16 primary studies published between 1997-2008
  - ◆ Both national and international studies
  - ◆ 11 quantitative, 3 qualitative and 2 used a mixed methodology
- Three broad themes:
  - ◆ Parental characteristics
  - ◆ Child development
  - ◆ Child protection case outcomes



# What is intellectual disability?

- No universal definition of intellectual disability
- Common indicators include:
  - ◆ IQ less than 70
  - ◆ Difficulties adapting to new environments
  - ◆ Difficulties with safety awareness, self-care and communication skills
- Indicators criticised as too 'diagnostic' and deficits focused



# What is intellectual disability cont...

- Alternative definition:
  - ◆ Intellectual disability refers to the need for specific training and skills that most people acquire incidentally and that enable individuals to live in the community without supervision  
(Dever, 1990 in Mildon, et al., 2003, p.1)
- Cognitive limitations vary from individual to individual
- Assessments should be on a case-by-case basis



# Prevalence

- No up-to-date statistics
- In 1998, the ABS reported:
  - ◆ 92,307 children in Australia
  - ◆ living with a parent whose main condition was a mental or behavioural disorder
  - ◆ (incorporates psychoses and neuroses as well as intellectual disorders)
- Equates to roughly 1-2% of Australian children
- Generally acknowledged that numbers are increasing



# Risk and protective factors

- Risk continuum from no risk to high risk
  - ◆ Some factors increase risk (risk factors)
  - ◆ Some factors reduce risk (protective factors).
- Term risk has negative connotations and implies heightened risk
- Presence of risk factors does not mean parents will abuse/neglect their children
- Identifying possible risk factors will help to determine points of intervention and specific support needs



# Parental capacity and assessment

- Assessing parental capacity of parents with intellectual disability is difficult
- No clear definitions of good enough parenting
- Guides for support workers usually limited
- Evidence suggests assessment tools used inappropriately:
  - ◆ Over reliance on IQ testing
  - ◆ Preoccupation with parent's intellectual disability as reason for parental difficulties
  - ◆ Undertaking assessments in inappropriate contexts or circumstances



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# Parental capacity and the risks of neglect

- Common perception that parental intellectual disability increases risk of child neglect
- Neglectful parents can be categorised as:
  - ◆ Having poor problem solving skills
  - ◆ Lack of understanding human relationships
  - ◆ An inability to engage positively with children
- Neglect from parents with an intellectual disability is usually associated with lack of knowledge regarding healthcare and child safety



# Parental capacity and the risks of abuse

- Parents with intellectual disability are vulnerable to other perpetrators targeting them or their children
- For example, a UK study of 30 adults raised by parents with intellectual disability found:
  - ◆ Over half the sample reported physical or sexual abuse
  - ◆ Most of the abuse was perpetrated by the parents' partner(Booth & Booth, 1998)



# Parental capacity and the risks of abuse

- Parental intellectual disability and child abuse
  - ◆ Some parents with an intellectual disability will abuse their children
  - ◆ Few studies have assessed if the risk is higher than other parent groups
- Parental competence of parents with intellectual disabilities needs to be assessed on a case-by-case basis
- Can not assume a general lack of competencies in parents with low IQ



# Social Isolation

- Research shows parents with intellectual disabilities:
  - ◆ More likely to be socially isolated
  - ◆ Find it difficult to develop support networks
  - ◆ Generally dissatisfied with the support received
- Of those who do have support, support comes mainly from family networks or support workers (not peers)



# Parental stress

- Stress for parents with intellectual disability increased by:
  - ◆ Economic pressures
  - ◆ Stigmatisation
  - ◆ Lack of support
  - ◆ History of failure (e.g academic achievement, employment opportunities)
- High levels of maternal stress associated with less positive and more hostile parenting



# Past histories of abuse or neglect as children

- Association between past histories of abuse or neglect and a parent's propensity to abuse their own children
- Parents (mainly mothers) with intellectual disability report very high rates of child abuse/neglect (especially sexual abuse)
  - ◆ In UK study, 79.6% of parents with intellectual disabilities had experienced abuse or neglect as a child (McGaw et al., 2007)
  - ◆ In an Australian study, 46% of sample reported being victims of child sexual abuse and over half had experienced physical abuse (Llewellyn et al., 2003)



# Low socio-economic status

- Parents with intellectual disability more likely to experience socio-economic hardships
- Poverty is unlikely to be a key risk factor on its own
- Socio-economic problems associated with:
  - ◆ Unemployment
  - ◆ Housing instability
  - ◆ Mobility (e.g transport)
  - ◆ Neighbourhood (safety, resources/services, accessibility)



# General health problems

- Parents with intellectual disabilities are also at risk of poorer health outcomes
  - ◆ An Australian study showed mothers with intellectual disabilities had significantly poorer health compared with the general population (Llewellyn et al., 2003)



# Mental health problems

- Parents with intellectual disability found to experience higher rates of mental health problems than the general community
  - ◆ In the UK, McGaw and colleagues (2007) reported 45% of their sample identified symptoms of a mental health disorder, including depression and anxiety disorders



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# Characteristics of the child

- Risks of abuse increase when child's intellectual ability surpasses the parents
- A parents ability to cope may become more difficult as their children get older
- When the child has learning problems of their own, parents may also struggle



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# Risks of abuse and neglect: Summary

- Parental intellectual disability does not mean a child will be at high risk of abuse or neglect
- Intellectual disability is associated with range of problems also associated with abuse and neglect
- The two most common risk factors for child protection involvement are substance abuse and domestic violence
- Parents with intellectual disability did not experience heightened rates of D&A or DV



# Support services

- Where risk factors are identified, parents need to be linked with appropriate support services
- However, research indicates:
  - ◆ Support services rarely meet needs of families affected
  - ◆ Practitioners tend to focus on deficits and ignore strengths
  - ◆ Practitioners may feel ill equipped to meet specific needs of parents with intellectual disability
  - ◆ Communication between support agencies is generally poor



# Support needs

- Parents with intellectual disability suggest:
  - ◆ A variety of support be available (e.g life skills training, 24 hour support line)
  - ◆ Appropriate support needs to be coordinated at both local and national levels
  - ◆ Ongoing support should be provided to parents who have their children removed (Tarleton & Ward, 2007)



# Service delivery

- Literature suggests that services should be:
  - ◆ Prevention focused
  - ◆ Family-centred
  - ◆ Strengths-based
  - ◆ Long-term
  - ◆ Flexible
  - ◆ Performance rather than knowledge-based



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# Promising practice in Australia

- *Healthy Start* - National Strategy to help young children of parents with learning difficulties
- Key aims of the strategy include:
  - ◆ Increasing knowledge and skills of parents with intellectual disabilities;
  - ◆ Increasing knowledge and skills of human service workers and;
  - ◆ Developing services of demonstrated need such as social support and self-advocacy skills
- Key Strength: Program under evaluation and is an evidence-based service model of service delivery



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# Quality of research reviewed

- Small quantity of primary studies
- Several limitations with body of research:
  - ◆ Only 3 studies used a comparison group
  - ◆ Almost all used small sample sizes (highest sample was 82)
  - ◆ Samples were restricted to families already in contact with support services
  - ◆ Mothers were primarily the targeted sample group
  - ◆ Focus on deficits, rather than protective factors
- Research findings should be viewed with caution



# Conclusion

- Intellectual disability per se is a poor indicator of parental capacity
- While intellectual disability may impact parenting capacity, assessments must be made on a case-by-case basis
- Parents with intellectual disabilities are more likely to experience other problems that increase the risk of abuse and/or neglect
- Support services could be improved
- Further research is needed



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# Accessing the research

This presentation can be downloaded from:

[www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/presentations/diary](http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/presentations/diary)

We anticipate a paper based on this presentation will be available in the coming months

For alerts about new Clearinghouse papers and resources join the *childprotect* email discussion list:

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