



**FAMILIES NEED
FATHERS**

Fathers of Children with Disability

Having a child with disabilities presents unique challenges and concerns for both parents. It is estimated that in England there are over half a million children with a disability (ranging from mild to serious) or chronic illness.

Parents may experience: financial difficulty, feelings of social isolation and conflict with traditional gender roles.

The average total cost of raising a child with disabilities can be up to three times higher than that of a non-disabled child. However whilst having higher expenditure, the parents also have less opportunity to work. Their income may be reduced by having to take more days off for example to look after their child when ill, attend support groups, etc. Furthermore families with disabled children are more likely to be in the lower brackets for disposable income¹.

The parents may socialise less and become isolated from their friends. They may feel a lack of social-support, especially as the child grows older and requires more physical support. From the age of eighteen, care responsibility moves from "specialised paediatric teams to adult teams whose caseload is largely made up of the elderly" and who are less equipped to provide necessary support².

A body of evidence suggests that fathers find themselves excluded when arranging care and support for their children and marginalised by support services. Research by the Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities indicates that when attending support meetings, many fathers felt their presence to be unexpected with practitioners' reactions being "surprised and

occasionally unwelcoming³".

Gender roles tend to become more segregated. The mother is more likely to adopt a caring role while the father is inclined to provide financial support for the family. The financial pressures and "continuing differences in male and female wages"⁴ places further strain on family wellbeing.

These parents also have a greater chance of experiencing marital problems and divorce⁵.

Coping with pressures

The type of disability the child has determines the caring demand and amount of pressure a parent may feel. Nonetheless, people react to strain differently and the methods they adopt affect their ability to draw support from their partner and in turn how successfully they can manage their circumstances. Social support has also been indicated as a key factor in helping parents deal with the increased responsibility of caring for a child with disability.

Risk of depression for these parents is reduced by having a supportive spouse. This relationship helps alleviate stress, which otherwise can lead to: criticising one another, partner conflict and finally withdrawal from family life which reduces support even further.

Support from practitioners can give emotional as well as practical help. Research has found that some parents have found problems; communicating between services, receiving contradictory advice and continual worry of services being withdrawn. Practitioners could reduce this additional stress by coordinating the

1 National Statistics (2006a) Social Trends: Number 36. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

2 Prime Minister's Strategy Unit (2005). Improving the life chances of disabled people. London: Cabinet Office.

3 Christine Towers 'Lets not forget about Fathers', (Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities 2007)

4 'Growing together' One Plus One (2007)

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various services parents are working with.

Financial pressure can further add to stress. Research highlights that parents would benefit from “extending supportive services beyond the early years and making them available to children with a range of disabilities throughout the lifespan; enhancing the skills and co-working of those offering support; breaking down professional disciplinary boundaries; and ensuring support is available at times of change, challenge and crisis”.

Implications:

Children’s development is enhanced by a positive parental relationship. Research suggests that a poor relationship between parents can have a negative effect upon the physical health, psychological development and displayed behaviour of a child.

Fathers of children with disabilities “face more depression, as well as more parenting and child-related stress and often feel their parental situation is more uncontrollable.”⁶ In addition to this fathers’ upset after the birth was found to be ‘unrecognised and unexpressed’, with neither health nor education professionals nor employers recognising their need for inclusion. These factors are intensified by professionals’ and support organisations’ disregard of the father’s needs.

However “while the fathers are less likely to receive support from professionals they are actually more willing than mothers to seek outside help”.⁷ Research indicates that most fathers place ‘great importance’ on their inclusion into ‘group and

⁶ Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities (2007) *Recognising Fathers: understanding the issues faced by fathers of children with a learning disability*

⁷ Lamb, M.E., & Laumann-Billings, L.A. (1997). *Fathers of children with special needs* In M.E. Lamb (ed.), *The Role of the Father in Child Development* (3rd ed.). New York: John Wiley & Sons.

community activities’.

In summary research indicates that areas needing improvement include: a reduction in the financial difficulties faced by families, extension of support services available to parents (particularly past early childhood) and greater equality and inclusion of fathers by support services and professionals.

Links and Support

Financial Support:

Two primary forms of government financial support exist for parents raising a child with a disability, these are: ‘Disability Living Allowance’ and Carer’s Allowance. The links below provide details on how to qualify for this aid and what is needed to apply.

http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/DisabledPeople/FinancialSupport/DG_10011731 (Disability Living allowance)

http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/CaringForSomeone/MoneyMatters/DG_10012522 (Carer’s allowance)

Support Groups/Charities:

‘Direct Gov’ also offers links to various support services and charitable organisations concerned with aiding parents with disabled children.

http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/CaringForSomeone/CaringForADisabledChild/DG_10026501

www.parentlineplus.org.uk Parent line plus is a national organisation offering advice and a number of services to assist all parents.

www.cafamily.org.uk Contact a Family is a national charity offering services specific to the parents of a disabled child – irrespective of the type or degree of disability.



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www.kids.org.uk/ KIDS is a charity offering regional and national services for parents of a disabled child and professional organisations assisting families/children.

www.whizz-kidz.org.uk A national charity – Whizz Kids helps to facilitate increased mobility and independence for disabled children.

www.varietyclub.org.uk A national charity known for its celebrity endorsements – arranges activities and events for disabled children and offers equipment and support to the families.

Research/Policy:

Fatherhood Institute:

<http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/index.php?id=17>

Provides details regarding policy and research studies into fathers of disabled children

One Plus One:

<http://www.oneplusone.org.uk/ICOR/Research.php?Page=Parenthood>

A charity providing policy and research on various topics concerning parenthood

Many of the charitable organisations referenced also provide independent research and publications.