

APA RESOLUTION on Parents With Disabilities

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Psychologists wield significant influence over pivotal issues central to the lives of people with disabilities, including their role as parents. There are 4 million parents with disabilities with minor children, which is 6% of all U.S. parents (Kaye, 2011). Further, 25.7% of families in 2019 included at least one family member with a disability (Young, 2021; Young & Crankshaw, 2023). It is imperative that psychology more actively work to reduce biases, challenge stereotypes, and champion the provision of appropriate supports and resources for this diverse and often underserved population. As stated by Valdez and Swenor (2023), “Dismantling structural ableism needs to be prioritized, since more than 27% of U.S. adults have disabilities, which may be visible or invisible, congenital or acquired, static or dynamic” (p. 1827). Under the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA), a person is considered disabled if they have a physical or mental impairment that significantly limits a major life activity, including include self-care, manual tasks, seeing, hearing, walking, speaking, breathing, learning, communicating, and working, have a history of such an impairment, or are perceived as having such an impairment. The 2008 amendment to the ADA clarified that episodic or in remission impairments are considered disabilities if they substantially limit a major life activity when active and that the determination of impairment should not consider the ameliorative effects of mitigating measures (ADA, 1990; ADAAA, 2008).

The assumption that individuals with disabilities are unfit for parenting has persisted for decades (Mayes, Llewellyn, & McConnell, 2006). For example, the United States has a regrettable history of forcefully sterilizing women with intellectual disabilities (Murphy & Feldman, 2002) with the assumption that these individuals are incapable of making decisions regarding sexuality and parenthood (National Council on Disability, 2012). However, self-advocacy organizations and emerging research challenge these beliefs. Just as all parents can benefit from early and ongoing support, such support can also assist parents with disabilities in enhancing parenting skills to play a meaningful role in raising their children (Andrews & Ayers, 2016). Deaf parents are often perceived as unable to stimulate their children’s language skills, while blind parents are assumed to lack the ability to provide sufficient attention and discipline (Powell, 2019). Parents with spinal cord injuries may face doubts about their capacity to adequately supervise their children. Similarly, parents with intellectual disabilities are presumed to be wholly incapable of caring for children or learning essential parenting tasks (Powell, 2019). Moreover, parents with psychiatric disabilities experience significant stigma, falsely suggesting they pose a danger to their

children, often without any factual basis. Such bias against parents with disabilities lacks scientific evidence (NCD, 2012). Studies show that disability alone does not predict parenting problems, and assumptions that children will be burdened by caring for their disabled parents are unfounded (Kirshbaum et al., 2003; Lanci, 2018). Some scholars even suggest that children of parents with disabilities often have favorable outcomes (Cureton, 2016).

THE ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGISTS

Psychologists play an important role in evaluating the parenting abilities of individuals with disabilities and conducting psychological assessments (APA, 2022) as well as in relevant legal proceedings (e.g., custody evaluations). Psychologists provide various forms of therapy, including individual, group, couples, and family therapy, to individuals with disabilities. These therapeutic approaches may address reproductive health concerns and parenting issues (Andrews & Dunn, 2019). It is thus critical that such assessments be culturally appropriate and fair (APA, 2022; AERA, APA, & NCME, 2014; Hill-Briggs et al., 2007). In addition, parents with disabilities must be provided reasonable and appropriate accommodations (NCD, 2012). Psychologists must diligently appraise the strengths and needs of both parents with disabilities and their children, shifting away from the traditional deficits-based approach that has historically prevailed in such assessments (Albert & Powell, 2020; APA, 2022). Some researchers have also addressed the unique insights that persons with disabilities bring to parenting a child who may also have a disability (Crane et al., 2021).

Psychologists play a pivotal role in assessing the parenting abilities or prospective parenting skills of individuals with disabilities, particularly in cases involving the removal of children from their custody or when a parent with a disability seeks to adopt. Regrettably, parents with disabilities have historically encountered imbalanced treatment, limited or nonexistent accommodations, and the enduring biases of providers during these evaluations (Powell et al., 2020; NCD, 2012). The outcomes of these evaluations carry immense significance, as they can be invoked in legal proceedings to terminate parental rights or impede the potential adoption of a child. Notably, the Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities (CRPD) asserts the right of individuals with disabilities to adopt children, yet the United States has yet to ratify the CRPD. Nevertheless, equal protection is afforded through the Americans With Disabilities Act, although these protections seldom translate into equitable opportunities for adoption (Powell, 2019).

DISPARITIES WITHIN THE LEGAL SYSTEM

Accordingly, it is imperative for psychologists to possess a deep understanding of the biases and prejudices confronted by parents with disabilities. As noted by the American Bar Association, individuals with disabilities face biases, stereotypes, and stigma regarding their ability to perform tasks, including their ability to effectively parent (ABA, 2017).

In 2017, the American Bar Association (ABA) addressed disparities within the legal system faced by parents with disabilities and urged “all federal, state, territorial, and tribal governments to enact legislation and implement public policy providing that custody, visitation, and access shall not be denied or restricted, nor shall a child be removed or parental rights be terminated, based on a parent’s disability, absent a showing—supported by clear and convincing evidence—that the disability is causally related to a harm or an imminent risk of harm to the child that cannot be alleviated with appropriate services, supports, and other reasonable modifications” (ABA, 2017, p. 1). In its resolution, the ABA also urged “all federal, state, territorial, and tribal governments to enact legislation and implement public policy providing that a prospective parent’s disability shall not be a bar to adoption or foster care when the adoption or foster care placement is determined to be in the best interest of the child” (ABA, 2017, p. 1).

In its resolution, the ABA recognized that 30%–50% of parents with disabilities lose custody of their children (ABA, 2017; Booth & Booth, 2004) and that “removing a child from their parents creates severe emotional and psychological trauma, including lessened abilities to self-regulate behavior, handle social interactions, and build positive self-esteem and self-reliance.” (ABA, 2017, p. 5).

The ABA also cited a report from the National Council on Disability detailing “persistent, systemic, and pervasive discrimination” against parents and prospective parents with disabilities within the child welfare and family law systems (NCD, 2012). Just as parents with disabilities are more likely to have their children taken into care, individuals with disabilities seeking to become parents are also likely to face significant legal and administrative agency hurdles in the fostering and adoption processes.

HEALTH CARE NEEDS

Psychologists actively collaborate with interdisciplinary healthcare providers to offer comprehensive reproductive health care, providing education, resources, and tailored programs to meet the sexual and reproductive health needs of people with disabilities (APA, 2022). Within this realm, psychologists must remain attuned to the prevailing stigma surrounding sexuality, reproduction, and disability while proactively striving to challenge ableist assumptions. Psychologists have the ability to meet the unique needs of parents with disabilities, offering support groups, skill-building workshops, and parent training programs. Psychologists can also offer insight at training programs for medical professionals (e.g., to challenge the

misassumptions around sexuality, reproduction, and parenting). The effectiveness of these efforts hinge upon the involvement and input from the disability community to ensure cultural appropriateness (Andrews & Dunn, 2019).

Psychologists conduct vital research on the sexual and reproductive health needs of individuals with disabilities, aiming to identify health disparities and barriers to care (APA, 2022). They also explore disabled parenting experiences to enhance understanding and develop interventions (Rivera Drew, 2009). However, there is a noticeable research gap, with limited research on the experiences of parents with disabilities compared to the extensive literature on parenting disabled children (Andrews & Dunn, 2019).

RESEARCH ON PARENTING

Parents with disabilities often face unique challenges, including prejudice, limited support, and inadequate access to resources. Nevertheless, studies consistently demonstrate that they exhibit effectiveness and capability as parents (Feldman, McConnell, & Aunos, 2012). Many parents with disabilities express high levels of contentment and gratification in fulfillment of their parental roles, fostering strong bonds with their children, and creating nurturing environments (National Council on Disability, 2012). In examining the self-esteem experiences of adult children with parents with various disabilities, Kraus and Olkin (2020) discovered that perceived stigma related to parental disability was associated negatively with self-esteem, whereas interaction with other disabled families was significantly associated with increased self-esteem. Positive outcomes were also correlated with the availability of family resources and support, highlighting the notion that parents with disabilities are equally capable when provided with necessary resources.

Mazur (2006) conducted a qualitative study focusing on adolescent children and their parents with disabilities. The adolescents reported a range of both positive and negative experiences. Positive experiences included open discussions about disability with their parents and meeting families with similar disabilities. The adolescents had mixed views on helping with household chores, perceptions that were in line with a typical adolescent mindset. However, both the adolescents and parents viewed the occasions when children needed to assist with personal care as a negative aspect. Parents with disabilities do not routinely or intentionally use their children for caregiving tasks, but rather assign developmentally appropriate duties similar to nondisabled parents (Powell, 2019). However, in some instances, parents with disabilities lack the resources and support they need, and reluctantly may have their child assist, when no alternative is available.

An 8-year study, which included a substantial sample of nearly 2,500 young adult children of parents with various disabilities, challenged prevailing assumptions (Jacob et al., 2018). Those young adults generally exhibited high self-esteem, perceived minimal levels of stigma associated with having a disabled parent, and

reported positive upbringing experiences being raised by a parent with a disability. This pattern of findings challenges the notion that having a parent with a disability is inherently detrimental or hampers developmental outcomes. It is important to note that a hierarchy exists, leading to heightened discrimination against parents with the most stigmatized disabilities, such as intellectual and mental health disabilities.

DIVERSITY OF LIVED EXPERIENCE

The experiences of parenting among individuals with disabilities are diverse and complex, making generalizations or stereotypes inappropriate (APA, 2022; Wołowicz-Ruszkowska, 2016). Various factors influence the outcomes of parenting in this context, including individual experiences, capacities, available support, and resources, as well as societal attitudes and perceptions (National Council on Disability, 2012). Studies examining outcomes are often complicated by the effects of economic hardships and lower educational levels (Powell, et al., 2017; Sonik et al., 2018). As a result, negative outcomes historically attributed to parental disability may indeed be accounted for, as well as other family stressors. Psychologists can promote positive outcomes for parents with disabilities and their families by addressing these factors and advocating for equal access to needed resources and support (National Council on Disability, 2012).

Prejudices against parents with disabilities include diminished societal expectations regarding partnership and parenthood, along with stereotypes depicting individuals with disabilities as vulnerable, inadequate nurturers, and incapable of caring for children (Andrews & Ayers, 2016; Kirshbaum & Olkin, 2002; Nario-Redmond, 2010). Parents with disabilities are often unfairly labeled as “selfish” for having children, presumed to rely on government aid, and judged as burdens on society alongside their children (National Council on Disability, 2012). These biases have real and sometimes permanent consequences for families, including forced separation (NCD, 2012).

Frederick (2017) noted how the medical model dominates social discourse on what good parenting practice is supposed to be. She indicated that non-normative mothers, including those who are poor, queer, women of color, and those with disabilities are regarded as “risky mothers” who are not competent to undertake the responsibility of motherhood. Furthermore, gay, lesbian, and bisexual people with disabilities are seen to represent a “minority within a minority” (Bennett & Cole, 2007, as cited in Duke, 2011, p.1) and may experience ableism, heterosexism, and homophobia on a regular basis within the sector of health and social services (Anedda et al., 2018; Gibson, 2016). In that sense, multiple marginalized parents are stigmatized and may be discriminated against with regard to adoption and fertility practice because clinical providers may refuse to provide service to those they judged as unfit for pregnancy and parenthood on ethical or legal grounds. In many instances, their reasons for refusal are not valid and discriminate against persons with disabilities who desire parenthood (National Council on Disability, 2012).

NEED FOR MORE RESEARCH

Although children of parents with intellectual disabilities may be at risk of developmental delays and behavioral issues (Feldman, 2002), few studies have explored important factors that mediate these outcomes, such as social and environmental support, caregiving style, and parenting-related education and training. Instead, these outcomes are often unjustly attributed solely to cognitive impairments (Andrews & Ayers, 2016). Additionally, although research on parent-training programs shows promise in providing skills and support to parents with intellectual disabilities, these programs are rarely used, and their availability and accessibility to parents are limited (Murphy & Feldman, 2002; Olsen & Clarke, 2003). A clearer picture requires more research.

Similarly, existing literature predominantly takes a deficit-based approach when discussing parents with mental health issues. Numerous studies outline the negative impact of parental mental illness on children, including emotions such as anger, isolation, shame, fear, sadness, grief, frustration, confusion, identity problems, poor self-esteem, and challenges with trust and intimacy (Nicholson, Sweeney, & Geller, 1998; Ackerson, 2003). However, the interpretation of these findings is complicated by the presence of multiple co-occurring factors such as poverty, trauma, substance use, and homelessness (Andrews & Ayers, 2016; Gatsou et al., 2017). Assumptions persist that parental mental illness universally harms children, but it is important to recognize that the stigma associated with mental illness can contribute to poorer outcomes in families (Corrigan & Miller, 2004; Gatsou et al., 2017). For instance, women with psychiatric disabilities often unnecessarily stop taking medication during pregnancy and worry about losing custody of their children during periods of worsening mental health or hospitalization (Andrews & Dunn, 2019). The fear of forced separation by the legal system is a legitimate concern, as individuals with psychiatric disabilities have the highest rate of child removal among all disability groups (National Council on Disability, 2012; Nicholson et al., 1998). Further research is necessary to examine potential mitigating factors, such as effective parenting strategies, parenting training programs, social support, and other social and interpersonal factors (Andrews & Dunn, 2019). Research should also take an expansive and intersectional approach addressing how disability status interrelates to such important factors as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, and socioeconomic status. It is crucial not to mistake the mere presence of mental illness for parental incapability (Andrews & Ayers, 2016), and intervention efforts should adopt a recovery-oriented approach that involves the entire family (Gatsou et al., 2017).

CALL FOR ACTION

As highlighted in this resolution, it is imperative for psychologists to proactively acknowledge the pivotal role of psychology in advocating for fair and equitable treatment of parents with disabilities, while providing the necessary supports and resources they require. Moreover, psychologists must diligently deliver

culturally appropriate services, while recognizing and challenging the detrimental impact of ableist assumptions on parents with disabilities and their children. To effect meaningful change, it is crucial that psychologists engage in unbiased research endeavors that authentically capture the diverse experiences of these families. By taking concerted action in these areas, psychologists can contribute to a more inclusive and just society for parents with disabilities and their children.

APA calls upon the field of psychology and policymakers to support increased psychological research, intervention, advocacy, and policy to inform and guide decisions related to parents with disabilities, and to reduce disparities and biases faced by this population.

SPECIFICALLY:

- APA seeks expanded and new funding mechanisms to support research on the experiences of parents with disabilities in society, including but not limited to their interactions with health care, educational, and legal systems.
- APA calls for institutions, organizations, and governmental agencies to work with parents with disabilities to develop culturally responsive educational programs to increase awareness of difficulties faced by parents with disabilities (e.g., bias, prejudice) across society.
- APA echoes the 2017 Resolution of the American Bar Association (ABA), which urged all federal, state, territorial, and tribal governments to enact legislation and implement public policy:
- Providing that custody, visitation, and access shall not be denied or restricted, nor shall a child be removed or parental rights be terminated, based on a parent's disability, absent a showing—supported by clear and convincing evidence—that the disability is causally related to a harm or an imminent risk of harm to the child that cannot be alleviated with appropriate services, supports, and other reasonable modifications.
- Providing that a prospective parent's disability shall not be a bar to adoption or foster care when the adoption or foster care placement is determined to be in the best interest of the child.
- APA will work with the ABA and legal entities to create and disseminate educational programs so that parents with disabilities and individuals in the legal process better understand their legal rights and protections.
- APA calls on policymakers to establish policies that prevent bias and discrimination towards parents with disabilities.

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