

## Growing up with parents who have learning difficulties

A recent study by Tim Booth and Wendy Booth of the University of Sheffield explored the experience of children brought up in a family headed by a parent or parents with learning difficulties. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 30 now-adult children, the researchers challenge many common assumptions about the risks and outcomes of such an upbringing. They found that:

- f** 'Good-enough' parenting by people with learning difficulties is related to the amount of support available to the parents and the children via family and social networks.
- f** Some children showed considerable resilience in coping with lives filled with difficulty.
- f** There was little evidence of children having to assume the responsibility for 'parenting their parent'.
- f** Nearly all of the now-adult children had maintained a valued relationship with their families. Most remained close to the parent(s) with learning difficulties even when families split up.
- f** The authors conclude that:

It was the mostly commonplace quality of the children's lives as adults that was remarkable in the context of their upbringing.

The relationship between parenting and child outcomes is more complicated than most current thinking allows.

Children's destinies are not fixed by having a mother or father with learning difficulties.

In order to develop forms of preventive support, we need to learn more about what factors help some children rise above their disadvantages.

## Background

Almost nothing is known about the longer-term outcomes for children brought up by parents who have learning difficulties. While limited information is available about the effects of parenting by people with learning difficulties on early child development, there is none about the outcomes for older children through adolescence and into adulthood.

A key purpose of this study was to find out how successfully people born and brought up in a family headed by at least one parent with learning difficulties had managed the transition to adulthood. Exactly half of the now-adult children eventually recruited into the study had learning difficulties themselves.

The study was designed to address four main questions:

- What does it mean to be brought up by parents with learning difficulties?
- Does having a parent or parents with learning difficulties affect children's well-being and adjustment in later life?
- How do children cope with their parents' learning difficulties?
- Is there a clear link between parental competence and child outcomes?

## The transition into adulthood

The study focused on five aspects of the transition to adulthood: leaving school; leaving home; becoming a couple; becoming a parent; and assuming the role of an adult consumer in the marketplace. Comparisons were made with the wider population using evidence from recent research reviewed by Virginia Morrow and Martin Richards (*Social Policy Research Findings No 98*).

## Leaving school

There was no evidence that the now-adult children without learning difficulties were disadvantaged by their family background in making the transition from school when compared to other people from the same social class and the same neighbourhoods. Although most of the men had left school without qualifications, they had mostly succeeded in keeping themselves in jobs. While most of the women did not have paid employment, the reasons were bound up with ill-health or domestic commitments and reflected the somewhat more complex relationship between women and labour market participation.

Given that people with learning difficulties are even less likely than people with a physical impairment to find paid work in real jobs, it was not surprising that none of the men and women with learning difficulties were in work. There was nothing

to differentiate their post-school experience from that of other people with learning difficulties except perhaps that fewer were receiving traditional adult day services and a higher proportion were attending Further Education colleges.

## Leaving home

A total of thirteen of the thirty people in the study were still living with parents. Nine of this thirteen had learning difficulties.

Leaving home did not precipitate the breaking of bonds. Indeed, the majority of people in the study had maintained a valued relationship with their families, often despite threats to family continuity posed by their parents' separation or divorce, or the death of one parent. Twenty-five people (including all the men) said they were close to their mother; in twenty-two of these cases, the mother had learning difficulties.

## The transition to coupledom

Some previous research has suggested that the children of parents with learning difficulties might have difficulty in forming and maintaining relationships because of emotionally starved childhoods. In fact, the only people without learning difficulties in the study who had not had a long-term relationship had either experienced mental health problems (two cases) or were still quite young and living with their parents. About one in three had experienced the break-up of a long-term partnership. This proportion is not out of line with rates of dissolution in the wider society, especially among poor families where money problems place an additional strain on relationships.

None of the men with learning difficulties had found a partner, but three of the seven women had married. Lack of opportunity, lack of autonomy and active opposition are some of the factors that inhibit the formation of intimate relationships by people with learning difficulties. The study suggests that, for women with learning difficulties, having a mother with learning difficulties may serve as a positive role model.

## The transition to parenthood

All the people in the study who were or had been married had children of their own, except one of the women with learning difficulties. None of the children of those without learning difficulties had been admitted to care. Both the mothers with learning difficulties had had their children removed. The researchers conclude that, for people with learning difficulties, making the transition to parenthood involves more than just having children - it also means establishing the right to rear them.

### Becoming an adult consumer

The establishment of financial independence is an important aspect of the construction of individual adult identity. For those without learning difficulties in the study, their status as adult consumers was compromised only by their poverty.

The situation of the men and women with learning difficulties was different. Few controlled their own money. Almost always there was someone in the background - a parent in the case of the younger ones, a husband or a support worker in the case of those living independently - who held the purse strings.

### Risk and resilience

The experience of the people in the study clearly demonstrates that children's destinies are not fixed by having a mother or father with learning difficulties. Some children show considerable resilience in coping with lives filled with difficulty. Such resilience is fostered or enhanced by protective factors that mediate children's response to risk and shield them from the hazards of their environment.

In line with other research in this field, the study points to three broad sets of variables that may act as protective factors:

- **personality characteristics** *sociability, responsiveness to others, and an outgoing nature* as shown by a readiness to join in activities and take on responsibility.
- **family characteristics:** *warmth and mutuality* (as shown, for example, by feelings of having been loved as a child and of having done things together as a family), *stability* (as shown, for example, by having at least one parent alive throughout childhood and an absence of separations or the loss of a close relative), and *security* (as provided, for example, by having grandparents who live near, a supportive uncle or aunt at home, parents who can manage money).
- **external supports:** *supportive relationships outside the home and participation and involvement in the wider community* (as shown, for example, by receiving mainstream schooling, having a job, belonging to local clubs and societies, being part of a close-knit neighbourhood).

These protective factors may be missing from some people's lives, or they may change over time, or they may not be strong enough to buttress an individual against the risks they face. The balance between the

risks that heighten vulnerability and the protective factors that enhance resilience varies for different individuals and at different points in people's lives. The findings suggest that, contrary to a lot of current thinking, no simple link exists between parenting skills and child outcomes.

### Parents' dependence on children

It is widely assumed that 'role reversal' (where the child 'parents' the parent) characterises parent-child relationships where a parent has learning difficulties.

The study found little evidence of role reversal among the now-adult children in the study. Only five of the thirty people took on any major family responsibilities under the age of 18, and in all these cases their extra responsibilities were mainly confined to helping around the house and doing domestic chores. In all five of these cases, extra responsibilities fell on the child where a parent - usually a lone parent - lacked alternative sources of support.

### Conclusions

#### Parenting skills

Competent parenting is not solely dependent on the abilities of the parent. The problems faced by children of parents with learning difficulties in this study appear in many instances to have been the same as those faced by children of parents without learning difficulties, and broader lessons can be identified.

The findings suggest that the relationship between parental competence and child outcomes is more complicated than most current thinking allows. 'Good-enough' parenting is related to the amount of support available to the parents and their children via social and family networks. It is vulnerable to changes in the relationships that make up this network - the birth of another child, the death of a grandparent, a change of school, the separation of parents, the onset of unemployment, a move to a new house. All of these can affect the capacity of the family and social network to support the parents in their parenting. Competent parenting is also vulnerable to prejudicial attitudes and shortcomings in the provision of services.

#### Assessment of risk

The findings also raise questions about the current emphasis on the assessment of risk which underpins much professional practice in work with children and families. The researchers suggest that this has diverted attention from the equally important exploration of resilience as a factor in mediating children's responses to adversity. They conclude

that, in order to develop forms of preventive support, we need to learn more about *why* some children are not damaged by deprived childhoods and *what* factors help them to rise above their disadvantages.

### Role reversal

Current debate about young carers has focused attention on children who assume parental responsibilities within the family. Such role reversal within families in this study arose as a response to social isolation or to a lack of support. Adequate social supports are required to enable disabled parents to combat the environmental, social and economic factors that make it harder for them to maintain an ordinary family life.

### About the study

Thirty people (sixteen men and fourteen women) were recruited into the study. The median age of the group was 27: over half were between 20 and 30 years old. They divided equally into people with and people without learning difficulties. Twenty-eight of the thirty informants had just one parent who had learning difficulties, usually the mother. Twenty-three informants had a mother or father with learning difficulties who was still alive at the time of the interviews, of whom all but one remained in regular contact.

The study followed a narrative approach, using in-depth interviews as the primary method of collecting people's stories. Eighty-two interviews were completed with the people who took part in the study. The guiding purpose of the interviews was to produce first-person accounts of people's childhoods, family lives and relationships that document their growing-up and passage into adulthood in terms of their own experience.

### Further information

A report, *Exceptional Childhoods, Unexceptional Children: Growing up with parents who have learning difficulties*, by Tim Booth and Wendy Booth, is published by the Family Policy Studies Centre in association with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (ISBN 0 901455 00 9, price £9.95 plus £1.50 postage and packing)

See also, Tim Booth and Wendy Booth (1994), *Parenting Under Pressure: Mothers and fathers with learning difficulties*, Buckingham: Open University Press (ISBN 0 335 19194 0, £14.99).

### Related *Findings*

The following *Findings* look at related issues:

- 91 A survey of group-based parenting programmes (Jan 96)
- 95 The relationship between family life and young people's lifestyles (Apr 96)
- 97 Life on a low income (Jun 96)
- 98 Young people's transition to adulthood (Jun 96)
- 106 Parenting in the 1990s (Oct 96)

The following *Summary* is also relevant:

- 4 Family and parenthood (Feb 95)

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