

ENABLE Scotland's View

ENABLE Scotland has always campaigned for the right of people with learning disabilities to participate in society like any other citizen with appropriate support and assistance. ENABLE Scotland has also always worked from a practical perspective. People can only exercise their rights if they have the information and practical means to do so. In this context, we must accept that some people with learning disabilities will want to form sexual relationships and some will wish to have families. We must find means to support and develop their capacity to do this and to turn our back on traditional responses which have been discouraging, discriminatory and self-fulfilling.

Background Information

*The Same as You?*ⁱ (a review of services for people with learning disabilities) was published by the Scottish Executive in May 2000. It was the first review of learning disability services in Scotland for over 20 years.

This review states that we do not have enough detailed information about the number of people in Scotland who have learning disabilities. While there are some reported differences across the UK, studies suggest that in Scotland there are around 120,000 people with learning disabilities and that only 30,000 are in regular contact with local authorities or the health service in Scotland. There is no reference in the review as to the number of parents with learning disabilities, however, there was a paragraph devoted to parents with learning disabilities as follows:

“Some people with learning disabilities may choose to be parents. As with other parents, they will need a range of support and other help from their families and other agencies. Like other people, parents with learning disabilities can benefit from training and support in developing parenting skills. Some areas offer extra support which is helpful to them and their children.”

This is followed by a good practice example and continues with:

“Local authorities and NHS Trust should make sure that the needs for parents with learning disabilities and their children are identified and met.”

The first approach is too often one of child protection issues rather than providing support for the family.

ENABLE Scotland held a round table seminar in May 2002 where parents themselves talked of the need of a support network. In our experience people with learning disabilities can provide all the care that is needed to bring up a child with appropriate support if needed.

Current Practice Issues

Researchers agree that the numbers of parents with learning disabilities are increasing and it is important that parents with a learning disability are treated in the same way as other parents.

Research suggests that with adequate and appropriate support people with less severe learning disabilities can be effective parents.

Support for parents is still sporadic but some very good projects have been established which enable families to remain intact by offering practical and psychological support. The experiences of parents with learning disabilities have been that:

- There are no specific statistics of parents with learning disabilities.
- They are at risk of having their children removed and their parental responsibilities terminated on the basis of evidence that would not be applied to a non-disabled parent.
- They are likely to have their parenting skills judged much more harshly than other parents.
- Many parents with learning disabilities are caring for their child/children on their own or with the support of family or friends.
- Services tend to emphasise parents' deficits rather than focusing on their abilities and presume that they are incapable of parenting because of their learning disabilities.
- Family and childcare problems are often put down to the parent's learning disabilities and fail to take account of wider social and environmental factors such as poverty and poor housing and short comings in support services.
- Services which are discriminatory or unresponsive to their needs add a further burden to people whose coping abilities are already stretched and can lead to the situation breaking down.
- The administrative division between children and family services and learning disability services makes it hard for parents to access the expertise and support of the former.
- The lack of early interventions at prenatal stages.
- Stronger links should be made between disability organisations and organisations that are connected to parenting.

ⁱ *The same as you?* , The Scottish Executive, May 2000. Isbn 0-7480-9378-8

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