



Supporting Parents with Disabilities and their Families: Perspectives and Recommendations from Parents, Attorneys, and Child Welfare Professionals

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Introduction



People with disabilities are as likely as people without disabilities to be parents. Research indicates that they have higher rates of child welfare system involvement and termination of parental rights as compared to other parents. However, little is known about how disabled parents perceive their interactions with the child welfare system or their recommendations for improving how it works with families like theirs. Also, no known studies include the perspectives of attorneys who represent parents with disabilities.

In our study, we describe the perspectives of parents, child welfare workers, and attorneys on how the U.S. child welfare system works with parents with disabilities, and their recommendations for improvement.

Findings

We interviewed 15 parents with disabilities, 15 child welfare workers, and 15 attorneys who represent parents.

Parents who participated in our study had the following characteristics:

- Most parents were mothers, white, and between 36 and 45 years old.
- Most of the parents were heterosexual, and most were married or partnered.

- A majority had attended some college, and a majority were currently unemployed.
- The parents had between 1 and 5 children, over two-thirds of whom were age 9 or younger.
- Parents reported disabilities including traumatic brain injury, cerebral palsy, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and chronic illness.
- Most parents had multiple co-existing disabilities.

Professionals who participated in our study had the following characteristics:

- Most professionals were female, white, and between 26 and 45 years old.
- Most professionals had graduate degrees.
- Most attorneys worked in private practice, and most child welfare workers worked for their state or county.

Perspectives about the child welfare system's capacity to support disabled parents

We found five themes in participants' perceptions of how the child welfare system works with disabled parents:



Lack of expertise on disability.

Parents often felt that the child welfare system held them to unreasonable standards and did not understand how people with disabilities could effectively care for their children. Professionals felt that a lack of expertise on



disability often meant that parents were not accommodated properly, or were unnecessarily considered noncompliant.

Limited appropriate services for disabled parents.

Parents were disappointed and frustrated because the child welfare system often provided them inadequate or inappropriate services. Professionals felt that parents were usually offered “one-size-fits-all” services that were not tailored to meet parents’ disability-related needs.



Negative attitudes about parents with disabilities.

Parents experienced bias, especially assumptions by child welfare system professionals that they were unable to care for their children because of their disabilities. Professionals



agreed that the child welfare system tends to assume that parents with disabilities are unfit, and said that this can lead to providing parents with inadequate services, because of presumptions that disabled parents cannot benefit from support.

Challenging relationships.

Some parents had trouble trusting professionals because professionals had the power to remove their children. Similarly, professionals described the added effort needed to work with parents with disabilities in a system that was not set up to adequately support them.



Positive encounters.

Nevertheless, parents and professionals also described positive interactions with one another, particularly when parents felt that professionals were helpful



and respectful, and when professionals appreciated parents’ resilience and resourcefulness.

Recommendations for improving the child welfare system

Parents recommended that the child welfare system:

- Improve understanding of disability and parenting with disability
- Enhance services for disabled parents, making them more individualized and accessible
- Expand advocacy for disabled parents who are involved with child welfare
- Increase transparency so that parents can better understand the process in which they are involved

Child welfare professionals and attorneys recommended that the child welfare system:

- Increase training on and knowledge about working with parents with disabilities
- Improve services for disabled parents, including making them more individualized and accessible
- Increase resources so the child welfare system can support parents more effectively
- Address negative attitudes towards parents with disabilities

Next steps

Our findings have implications for policy and practice in how the child welfare system works with disabled parents and their families:

- Greater knowledge and training for professionals could help to alleviate bias and outdated beliefs about the competence of parents with disabilities.
- Information and training for child welfare professionals and attorneys should cover adaptive parenting strategies and equipment, appropriate parenting assessments, and legal mandates for child welfare professionals.





- Parents with disabilities should be involved in training, and able to share their experiences and insights.
- Supports and services that are individualized and accessible for parents with disabilities should be developed and implemented.
- Agencies must develop and implement policies and procedures for working with parents with disabilities and their families, including mechanisms for complying with disability rights laws.

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