

Parents with physical disabilities and their parenting experiences: A scoping review of qualitative studies

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Introduction and Background

People with disabilities have the same human rights as everyone else, including the right to parent, as recognized under international and national laws such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and U.S. laws like the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (1-5).

Although protections exist, disabled parents, who make up an estimated 6-10% of all parents, face higher risks of health issues, poverty, housing instability, child welfare involvement, and barriers to benefits, compared with non-disabled parents (6-14).

Like other disabled parents, parents with physical disabilities face numerous barriers and challenges in their parenting role due to factors such as discrimination, lack of physical access, and societal bias and stigma (14,15,16). Parents with physical disabilities face discrimination, stigma, and limited access to equipment and support for everyday parenting tasks, like breastfeeding, bathing, and carrying their child (17-19). Because these barriers persist, better support systems and rehabilitation services are needed (15,20). Although discrimination and barriers for disabled parents are well-documented, few studies examine these experiences from parents' own perspectives or highlight the positive aspects of

parenting as a disabled adult (18). To address this gap, this paper reviews existing research to examine:

- 1) the parenting experiences of adults with physical disabilities, and
- 2) the challenges, needs, and supports they report.

This study is unique in providing an in-depth, international perspective on barriers and sources of support for disabled parents across multiple countries.

Methods

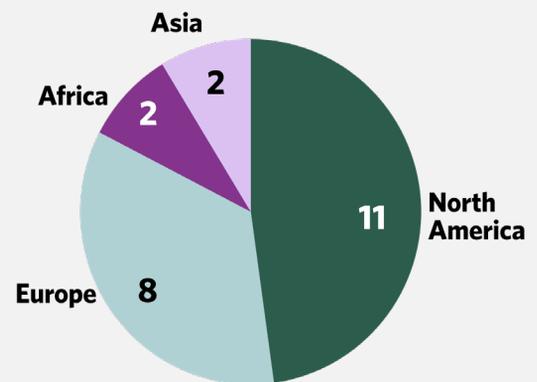
The authors conducted a scoping review, an academic technique that examines existing research to show what is known and identify gaps, to understand what parenting is like for adults with physical disabilities. Because they wanted to capture people's real, lived experiences, they only included qualitative studies (studies that use interviews, focus groups, or open-ended responses). They searched four major research databases for English-language articles published between 1990 and 2024. To be included, a study had to focus on parents with only physical disabilities who have minor children and they could be from any country. Studies were excluded if they had parents with physical and other disabilities, or if they looked only at parents of adult children. After screening titles, abstracts, and full texts, 25 studies were included. The studies were then analyzed to identify key themes.

Findings

Quantitative

- 25 publications covering 23 studies were included
- 303 parents participated across studies (251 mothers) with more than 253 children.
- The studies were conducted primarily in North America (11 studies) and Europe (8 studies), with 2 studies from Africa and 2 from Asia
- Most studies used interviews (20 studies), with some including focus groups,
- The parents' ages ranged from 20-59 years
- Disability types represented in the studies included 6 studies on parents with spinal cord injury, two studies reported on mothers with rheumatoid arthritis, and the remaining studies included parents with multiple types of physical disabilities.

Out of the 23 studies, most were conducted in Europe and North America.



Qualitative

The review identified four themes:

1 navigating barriers and challenges;



2 mixed experiences with family members;



3 mixed experiences with non-family support persons; and



4 adaptation, resilience, and positivity in disabled parenting



Parents faced social, financial, and accessibility barriers, including discrimination and limited support, starting even before pregnancy:



One parent shared, “Unfortunately, financial difficulties have an impact. Because I don’t have a job, you can’t provide the child with everything you want. It is hard and frustrating. Sometimes, I get depressed because of it; however, it is balanced by moments of joy and you forget about it for a while.” (21).

Experiences with family members were mixed: partners often provided strong support, while other family members could be either supportive or challenging:



One disabled parent explained, “My mother mostly comes to talk. We manage on our own. However, if she sees something needs to be done, she will do it without asking. Sweeping the floors, dusting, grumble about something” {laughing} (21).

Non-family support persons, including healthcare providers and teachers, sometimes conveyed bias or lacked knowledge, though some provided positive support:



One Ghanaian mother with a physical disability stated, “Once I went with my baby and you could see I was struggling to breastfeed. The nurse looked at me and rained insults on me” (22).

Many parents highlighted positive aspects of parenting, including adaptation, joy, and resilience:



One parent shared, “Today, I see it [motherhood] as the best title; [...] the most important title. I have learned that I should try, even if something seems to me threatening and scary at first, because of my disability. I always try [...] to find a solution, always try to think, how do I do it together with my disability? It [my disability] really motivated me to look for solutions” (23).

Many disabled parents described parenting as “rewarding” and “one of their greatest accomplishments.”

Conclusion

Across countries, parents with physical disabilities faced discrimination, limited support, and other barriers, but also showed resilience, adaptation, and joy in parenting. Experiences with family and non-family support persons were mixed, offering both challenges and meaningful help. These findings underscore the importance of centering disabled parents' lived expertise and directly consulting them about how disability shapes parenthood, rather than making assumptions. Support programs should build on these strengths, recognize parents as experts in their own experiences, and reduce social and environmental barriers. More research is needed on diverse disabled parents, especially those with intersecting identities and those in low- and middle-income countries.

How to Cite This Brief

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