



Behavioral and Cognitive Outcomes of Young Children in the United States Whose Mothers have Intellectual Disabilities

Robyn M. Powell and Susan L. Parish

Abstract

Despite an increase in international studies examining the experiences of parents with intellectual disabilities (ID) and their children, few studies have been conducted in the US using population-based data. This study examined the behavioral and cognitive outcomes of 3-year-old US children of mothers with ID compared with children of mothers without ID. We found that children of mothers with ID had poorer behavioral and cognitive outcomes in comparison to same-age children of mothers without ID. Notably, however, children of mothers with ID were not at increased risk of being aggressive unless their family income was below 200% of the federal poverty level. Further, families headed by mothers with ID faced multiple hardships related to socioeconomic factors, limited social supports, and poor self-reported health. Accordingly, policies and programs must be implemented to address the needs of these families.

Introduction and Review of the Literature

The prevalence of parents with ID is unknown, but it is increasing as opportunities for community integration continue to improve.^{1,2} However, few policies and programs adequately support these families.^{2,3} Indeed, rather than provide supports, child protective services remove children of parents with ID from their homes at disproportionately high rates.^{1,4}

To better understand the needs of these families, there is a growing body of international research investigating outcomes of children whose parents have ID. Past studies have found that children of parents with ID are more likely to experience cognitive, behavioral, and emotional disabilities if the parent has a childhood trauma history, mental illness, or limited social network.⁵⁻⁸ Mothers with ID may also have parenting difficulties if they have other comorbid conditions or have children with disabilities.⁵ Other studies have found that parents with ID often experience increased

stress, which can lead to their children having behavior problems.^{8,9} In addition, children of mothers with ID may have poor outcomes if their mother's male partner exhibits anti-social or abusive behaviors, or has a criminal history.⁵ This finding is noteworthy because women with ID are more likely to experience intimate partner violence than nondisabled women.^{10,11} Furthermore, research has found that even after controlling for ecological hardships (e.g., poverty, poor housing, social isolation) often experienced by parents with ID, children of these parents may be at increased risk of developmental and behavioral delays.^{12,13}

The paucity of existing population-based research in the US led us to address the following questions:

1. **Do the behavioral and cognitive outcomes differ for US children of mothers with and without intellectual disabilities?** and
2. **Do the contextual factors in which these families live predict children's behavioral and cognitive outcomes?**

To do so, we analyzed data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a nationally representative dataset, and compared mothers with ID ($n = 263$) and their children to mothers without ID ($n = 1,298$) and their children.

Findings

- Compared to mothers without ID, **those with ID were significantly younger.**
- Mothers with ID were **more likely to be unmarried.**
- Mothers with ID were **more likely to have income below 200% of the federal poverty level.**
- Mothers with ID were **more likely to lack a high school diploma.**
- Mothers with ID were **less likely to participate in organizations or groups.**
- After controlling for a variety of mothers' and family characteristics, **children of mothers with ID had higher rates of anxious/depressed and withdrawn behaviors as well as lower cognitive scores.**
- Children of mothers with ID **did not have higher rates of aggressive behaviors unless the mother's income was below 200% of the federal poverty level.**

Summary & Recommendations

We believe this is the first nationally representative US study to compare behavioral and cognitive outcomes for children of mothers with and without ID. Findings from our study suggest that children of mothers with ID may have poorer behavioral and cognitive outcomes in comparison to same-age children of mothers without ID. Notably, however, children of mothers with ID were not at increased risk of being aggressive unless their family income was below 200% of the federal poverty level. Our study also found that mothers with ID experience greater hardships than mothers without ID. Accordingly, this study's findings reinforce the need to fund and provide evidence-based supports for these families to address children's behavioral and cognitive development. Moreover, in light of the economic hardships experienced by these families, policymakers should increase income transfer program benefits, such as SSI.

Adapted from Powell, R.M. & Parish, S.L. (2016). Behavioural and cognitive outcomes in young children of mothers with intellectual impairments. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*. [DOI: 10.1111/jir.1230810.1111/jir.12308].

Authors & Acknowledgments

Robyn M. Powell, MA, JD, Lurie Institute for Disability Policy, Heller School for Social Policy and Management, Brandeis University; Susan L. Parish, PhD, MSW, Lurie Institute for Disability Policy, Heller School for Social Policy and Management, Brandeis University.

References

1. IASSID Special Interest Research Group on Parents and Parenting with Intellectual Disabilities (2008) Parents labelled with intellectual disability: position of the IASSID SIRG on parents and parenting with intellectual disabilities. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disability* 21, 296–307.
2. National Council on Disability (2012) *Rocking the Cradle: Ensuring the Rights of Parents with Disabilities and Their Children*. Author, Washington, DC.
3. McConnell D., Llewellyn G. & Bye R. (1997) Providing services to parents with intellectual disability: parent needs and service constraints. *Journal of Intellectual and Developmental Disability* 22, 5–17.
4. McConnell D., Feldman M., Aunos M. & Prasad N. (2011) Child maltreatment investigations involving parents with cognitive impairments in Canada. *Child Maltreatment* 16, 21–32.

5. McGaw S., Scully T. & Pritchard C. (2010) Predicting the unpredictable? Identifying high-risk versus low-risk parents with intellectual disabilities. *Child Abuse & Neglect* 34, 699–710.
6. McGaw S., Shaw T. & Beckley K. (2007) Prevalence of psychopathology across a service population of parents with intellectual disabilities and their children. *Journal of Policy & Practice in Intellectual Disabilities* 4, 11–22.
7. Granqvist P., Forslund T., Fransson M., Springer L. & Lindberg L. (2014) Mothers with intellectual disability, their experiences of maltreatment, and their children's attachment representations: a small-group matched comparison study. *Attachment & Human Development* 16, 417–36.
8. Meppelder M., Hodes M., Kef S. & Schuengel C. (2015) Parenting stress and child behaviour problems among parents with intellectual disabilities: the buffering role of resources. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research* 59, 664–77.
9. Llewellyn G. & McConnell D. (2002) Mothers with learning difficulties and their support networks. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research* 46, 17–34.
10. Wilson C. & Brewer N. (1992) The incidence of criminal victimization of individuals with an intellectual disability. *Australian Psychologist* 27, 114–7.
11. Sobsey D. (2000) Faces of violence against women with developmental disabilities. *Impact* 13, 2–27.
12. Feldman M. A. & Walton-Allen N. (1997) Effects of maternal mental retardation and poverty on intellectual, academic, and behavioral status of school-age children. *American Journal of Mental Retardation* 101, 352–64.
13. Emerson E. & Brigham P. (2014) The developmental health of children of parents with intellectual disabilities: cross-sectional study. *Research in Developmental Disabilities* 35, 917–21.