



Daughters of Fortune: Stories of Parents with Learning Disabilities Research Executive Summary

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A joint research project with Mind the Gap, learning disability theatre company.

*“We want to be parents like everybody else,
but we’re not having opportunities because of their attitudes”*

Background: People with learning disabilities are increasingly becoming parents. Despite good practice guidance existing in the UK (Working Together with Parents Network, 2016), learning disabled parents still face multiple disadvantages in their role as parents, and are more likely to live apart from their children. An innovative project funded by the Wellcome Trust has allowed Mind the Gap, the largest UK learning disability theatre company, to collaborate with university researchers from Royal Holloway University of London, to collate and share stories about the experiences of parents with learning disabilities through qualitative research alongside a number of artistic outputs (film, forum theatre, national touring theatre production, giant outdoor theatre events, and book). Here we summarise the research element of this broader project.

Method: Twenty-two parents with learning disabilities (17 mothers and 5 fathers), from across the UK, were interviewed by a small research team from Mind the Gap, including a principle researcher with learning disabilities. This user-led research methodology collected detailed accounts of the parents’ experiences. The interviews were analysed qualitatively using Thematic Analysis by academic researchers from Royal Holloway University, with continued involvement from researchers and participants with learning disabilities, to enhance research quality.

Results: Whilst there has been wealth of parents’ experience shared, the research has generated four substantive themes: (1) parents often feel in ‘**positions of powerlessness**’ in

their relationships, many have experienced bullying or abuse in intimate relationships, and have felt let down and lost trust in others, especially professionals; (2) they face **'assumptions of incompetence'**, that professionals and others think they cannot be good enough parents; (3) parents fight to **'challenge assumptions and prove competence'**; and (4) from these experiences of powerlessness and stigma, parents want to **'claim power'** in their lives, speak up for their own and other parents' rights, often through parent peer support and self-advocacy. An additional subgroup analysis of fathers interviewed revealed a fifth theme: (5) specific experiences of **'fathers feeling excluded'**.

Conclusions: The themes generated from the qualitative research reflect parents' experiences of feeling in powerless positions in various relationships, and facing assumptions of incompetence about their parenting ability. However, parents also talked about wanting to prove to others that they can be good parents, and about (re)claiming power in their lives through self-advocacy.

Implications: The broader project attempts to encapsulate 'inclusive research'; working collaboratively with learning disabled researchers and parents, to make sure 'academic' research resonated with their lived experience. Working with an artist-led research team has demonstrated the importance of 'research impact'; translating research into powerful stories, theatre and films, which aim to influence professionals, tackle stigmatised attitudes, and help parents themselves to *"take power back"*.

"We go out... telling them our story... so they can get the right services."

Contact: If you want to find out more about the research, please contact: Kate Theodore on 01784414303 or email kate.theodore@rhul.ac.uk

Or you can find out more at Mind the Gap website: <http://www.mind-the-gap.org.uk/projects/daughters-of-fortune>

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