

Chapter 23

Mental Health Issues among Family Members of Children with Mental Disability

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ABSTRACT

Parenting children with intellectual disabilities is challenging. Many of these children are misunderstood, while parents are often blamed for the difficulties. The reality is that parents of such children are themselves unable to understand the nature of their child's difficulties, what more to cope with the child. The child's difficulties pose challenge for the parents and siblings, and many parents struggle. The chapter will discuss types of problems faced by the children with mental disability, their parents and siblings, including the possible impact on mental health of the family. The chapter will as well discuss the impact of mental health difficulties in parents and its impact on their parenting. The chapter hopes to highlight the need to recognize parents who are struggling, what should professionals looked for in their assessment of families with children with intellectual disabilities. Identifying families who are struggling is important as the family environment has an impact on functioning and, consequently, service needs of the child.

INTRODUCTION

Looking after children¹ with intellectual disabilities (ID) is challenging. Adults often misunderstand these children. A lot of children with ID look healthy thus it confuses others why they are not behaving or evolving similarly to their peers.

Moreover, parents are often blamed for the difficulties i.e. that they are not doing enough for their child. The reality is many parents of children with ID are themselves unable to understand why their child

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is struggling or facing continuous difficulties, what more how to manage them. In most instances, the child's difficulties pose many challenges for the parents and siblings, and many parents struggle to cope.

The chapter discusses the mental health difficulties faced by the family of children with ID, specifically the impact on parents.

The section hopes to highlight the need to recognize parents with children with ID who are struggling and what medical and mental health professionals should look for in their assessment of these families. This issue is important as the family environment impact on the child's functioning and consequently on the services needed by the children and their family.

UNDERSTANDING CHILDREN WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY

Intelligence or the mental capacity of an individual is important to all humans. We use this ability to acquire and apply knowledge and skills to help us think, learn and deal with things around us effectively. In many cultures, children are particularly judged based on their intellectual abilities especially their academic performance.

Many more children with ID are surviving now than they did a century ago (DeWeaver and Kropf, 1992). Thus, in the recent years, children who are delayed or are slower in their development in their development have received a lot of attention and interest.

Affected children with reduced cognitive development struggle to understand concepts, to remember and utilize things expected of them. They are unable to learn as good or as fast as other children of the same age group. The other chapters of the book discuss these deficits and difficulties.

The presentation of the difficulties varies according to the severity of deficiency present, which corresponds approximately to the level of IQ scores (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; American Association on Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities, 2012). Categorized as mild, moderate, severe and profound difficulties, are discussed elsewhere in the book.

The reduced ability to adapt to the daily demands of the social environment (World Health Organization, 1992) affects all areas of their daily living. The children struggle even with simple things such as their daily routine, with mental abilities e.g. reading, remembering things taught and tasks expected of them. Reasoning, planning and thinking about things or issues does not come quickly. Subsequent impairment is seen across all activities of daily living e.g. in their personal care, keeping their schedules/routines and personal safety. Going about carrying out their day-to-day tasks is a struggle as they are unable to comprehend and remember there is a routine to follow, and how to go about it. The children frequently need assistance from people around them with their daily routines, e.g. handle school and doing their schoolwork. They often need repeatedly to be told what to do, how to behave, how to do things or tasks, etc. Thus, daily life is a struggle for the children and their family. It is hard for them to understand how things work, how to go about things and to decide even on simple issues. Evidently parents worry or become anxious when their child lacks behind their peers.

The deficits in global functioning *impact their quality of life* with a significant number of the children severely impaired in their everyday functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 1994; Einfeld et al., 2006; American Association on Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities, 2012). In many situations and to most people, these children are seen as being "childish" and not of their biological age. It is frustrating for people around them as the child is unable to cope well without help. As they do not live up to the

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