

Study entitled “The mental health of father carers of a son or a daughter with an intellectual disability: A mixed methods approach”

While caring can be a very rewarding experience, it has also been reported that some parents who care for a son/daughter with intellectual disabilities experience poor mental health at various points throughout their caring journey. In recent decades, the increasing lifespan of people with intellectual disabilities has led to parents caring for their son/daughter longer than in previous generations. Given that parents are now caring into older age it is particularly important to gain an understanding of the impact of caring on parents who care for a son/daughter with intellectual disabilities, and which factors are associated with poor mental health. Existing research in this area has traditionally focussed on mothers, due to the assumption that they are the main caregivers within the household. However, following a gradual change in societal attitudes towards the role of the father within the family unit and their potential impact on the child’s development, governmental policies within the UK have begun to acknowledge the importance of fathers. Thus far, only limited research has been conducted which focuses on the experiences of fathers of a son/daughter with intellectual disabilities. Using a mixed-methods approach, this study sought to gain further understanding of the well-being and experiences of fathers of a son/daughter with intellectual disabilities. A systematic review and meta-analysis found that fathers reported poorer mental health than fathers in the general population, but better mental health than mothers of a son/daughter with intellectual disabilities. Evidence for factors associated with poor father mental health was mixed, although marital support was significantly associated with better mental health in all included studies. The review identified a gap in our understanding of the experiences of older fathers in the literature, and interviews were conducted with seven older fathers (age 60+) to address this. The results corroborate previous claims that parents experience both positive and negative effects of caring for their son/daughter with intellectual disabilities. The findings also highlight the stress that fathers experienced in their ‘battle’ to obtain necessary supports and services. Further, the interviews demonstrated that this group of fathers continue to follow traditional gender roles within the family unit, despite recent claims that fathers are now more involved in caregiving. Fathers emphasised the importance of the family unit and their relationship with their son/daughter. This was further explored with analysis of father-child closeness in a longitudinal nationally representative data set. Findings revealed that higher marital satisfaction is associated with greater father-child closeness