DONALD BEASLEY INSTITUTE

Key Elements of Support for Parenting with a Learning Disability

A brief review of the literature related to parenting by people with a learning disability

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Whakataukī

Āheitia te tāngata ahakoa ko wai, ahakoa nō hea.

Enable the person to achieve their potential no matter who they are or where they are from.

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Kōrero Whakamārama: Kāi Tahu dialect is used when writing in te reo Māori, including the use of Kāi Tahu-specific words and the replacement of ng with k.

Cover Photo: Canva, 2026.

Content Forecast: The following literature review discusses child uplifts and removal from families. Please take care while reading.

Ihiraki / Table of Contents

Kā Whakamihi / Acknowledgements

“We need to change the stigma. It does affect people. It leaves a hole in their lives. Sometimes people might rush out because of the hole.” (Research advisor)

This resource is dedicated to parents with a learning disability and their supporters—past, present, and future. We particularly acknowledge the contribution of a long-standing friend of the Donald Beasley Institute—and research advisor to this project—who is a parent with a learning disability herself. After reading and reviewing this resource with us, she made the above comment, which communicates the pain of having a child removed.

We also want to acknowledge the parents who generously shared their experiences with us. Their stories and perspectives guided the creation of this resource. We acknowledge the frustration and pain that parents with a learning disability experience when their children are uplifted from their care. We also acknowledge their family, whānau and close supporters who share this distressing journey with them.

As the opening whakataukī expresses, we believe in both the power of people and the potential for systemic change. We hope this resource can contribute to long-overdue change for parents with a learning disability.

Whakamāramataka / Definitions

Learning disability—a term used to refer to people with intellectual disabilities. Self-advocates in Aotearoa New Zealand prefer this term, so it has been used in this resource.

We acknowledge that the term "intellectual disability" is still widely used in Aotearoa, particularly in legislation and by clinicians.

A current definition of learning disability from the United Kingdom is:
“A learning disability is a reduced intellectual ability and difficulty with everyday activities – for example, household tasks, socialising or managing money – which affects someone their whole life.

People with a learning disability tend to learn more slowly and may need support to develop new skills, understand complicated information and interact with others.

It’s important to remember that with the right support, most people with a learning disability in the UK can lead independent lives” (Mencap, n.d).

Whakatakika / Introduction

This document is a brief literature review of experiences of parents with learning disabilities from around the world, including Aotearoa New Zealand. This literature review provides the background to the two resource guides: **Reimagining Parenting: A resource for practitioners who support parents with learning disabilities** and **Reimagining Parenting: A resource for parents with learning disabilities**.

Kiteka / Findings

Parenting with a learning disability: What the evidence tells us

People with learning disabilities have the right to become parents. This right has been confirmed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), particularly in Article 23 – Respect for Home and the Family, which enshrines the rights of disabled people to have a family (United Nations, 2006). The UNCRPD was preceded by more than a decade of research on parenting by people with a learning disability, which consistently indicated that IQ alone was not an accurate predictor of parenting skills (Leaviss et al., 2011; Gudkova et al., 2019). Despite this clear finding, parents with a learning disability continue to be met with an assumption that they 'lack the capacity' to parent (Fudge Schormans et al., 2025; Powell, 2024). Decisions related to custody continue to be influenced by this assumption (Aunos et al., 2024; Aunos & Pacheco, 2021; More, 2023).

Negative assumptions about the parenting abilities of people with a learning disability have a long history rooted in eugenics (Malacrida, 2019; McConnell et al., 2022). Eugenics is an idea that was created in the late 19th century and had a significant influence across Westernised countries. Eugenics suggests that certain types of humans have desirable traits, while others have undesirable traits. Racialised people, disabled people and people in poverty were considered undesirable and subsequently a threat to morality in society (Malacrida, 2019). Therefore, reproduction for people who fit in this category, especially people with a learning disability, was suppressed or prevented through coerced and 'voluntary' sterilisation (Malacrida, 2019). These practices are no longer explicitly conducted or accepted

openly in public, but these ideas still manifest through the use of forced contraception and discriminatory child welfare interventions (McConnell et al., 2022). Ableism and disablism can be understood as modern forms of eugenics (Goodley, 2014).

Despite having parenting rights enshrined in the UNCRPD, evidence continues to report parents with learning disabilities experiencing higher levels of child removal, both internationally (DeZelar & Lightfoot, 2019; Pérez-Curiel et al., 2023; Threlfall et al., 2025) and in Aotearoa New Zealand (Boshier, 2020). In Aotearoa, a recent Ombudsman's report (Boshier, 2020) stated that the practice standards of Oranga Tamariki (New Zealand's Ministry for Children) do not uphold the rights of disabled parents. Not only are these parents not informed why their children are being removed from their care (Conder et al., 2008; Janeslätt et al., 2019), but the actions and measures they need to take to be reunited with their child(ren) are not explicitly outlined to them, and the exact measures have been found to change over time (Conder et al., 2019; Janeslätt et al., 2019; Mayes & Llewellyn, 2012; Mirfin-Veitch, 2010). Lack of transparency and consistency about the reasons for the removal and the actions needed to regain custody of their children makes it hard for parents to understand and meet the (parenting) standards for reunification (Lightfoot et al., 2017; Pacheco et al., 2022). Parents with learning disabilities are more likely to have a child uplifted from their care than people with similar societal status (Leaviss et al., 2011; Threlfall et al., 2025). In addition, compared to parents without disabilities, parents with learning disabilities are more likely to see their parenting rights completely removed (LaLiberte et al., 2016).

The literature indicates that the parenting rights of people with a learning disability continue to be breached. Accordingly, we need a better understanding of the factors contributing to parenting hardship or difficulty and the types of support that parents with learning disabilities find most effective (Franklin et al., 2022; Gudkova et al., 2019; Lightfoot, 2022; McConnell et al., 2022; Rosenthal et al., 2022; Starke, 2022; Stefánsdóttir et al., 2023; Zijlstra et al., 2023). Better utilisation of the well-established evidence base can inform parent-centred support and services for people with a learning disability and will move us closer to realising Article 23 of the UNCRPD - Respect for Home and Family.

Key messages

- Persons with a learning disability have the right to become parents and raise their children. This right is asserted in Article 23 of UNCRPD.
- Evidence suggests that IQ is not an accurate indicator of parenting skills.
- Parents with a learning disability continue to face a higher rate of child removal from their care and have a lower chance of being reunited with their children.

Uplifts and child removal in Aotearoa

The Oranga Tamariki Act 1989, Sections 78 and 40, grants Oranga Tamariki the power to uplift babies from their parents via an interim custody application to the family court. Interim custody orders may be entered with notice to the parents before the order is granted, allowing them an opportunity to reply. The available time to respond to such notices can be reduced upon application to the court, resulting in parents being given only a small window of one to three days to respond to the state's intention to remove their child from their care (Oranga Tamariki Act 1989).

An interim custody order can also occur without notice. This involves the court authorising an application to remove a baby without the parents receiving any prior warning (Oranga Tamariki, 2022). In both cases, if an order is granted, the child is then placed in the custody of Oranga Tamariki (Oranga Tamariki Act 1989, s 78). The New Zealand Police have a warrant, which gives their staff the power to uplift the child. Such removal or detention of a child may be carried out by force if necessary (Oranga Tamariki Act 1989, s 40). These uplift applications may be made to the courts where a child is considered to need care and protection (Oranga Tamariki Act 1989, s 78) due to suffering or risk of suffering serious harm through abuse, neglect, or abandonment (Oranga Tamariki Act 1989, s 14AA); if parents are unable to care for their child; or if the child has behaved in ways that are harmful to themselves or others (Oranga Tamariki Act 1989, s 14).

Research highlights that parents with a learning disability are often assumed to lack the capacity to care for their children and, therefore, are accused of neglect

(Augsberger et al., 2021; Conder et al., 2019; More, 2023; Powell, 2024). This contradicts the available research showing that, given adequate support, parents with a learning disability can develop and improve their parenting skills and look after their child(ren) (Augsberger et al., 2021; Tarleton & Turney, 2020). Lack of access to understanding their legal rights creates additional challenges for parents with a learning disability (Stefánsdóttir et al., 2023). Broader social inequities, especially in terms of economic security and access to justice, further disadvantage parents with a learning disability, compromising their ability to respond to legal challenges and breaches of their parenting rights.

Key messages

- Immediate (unnotified) uplifts put parents at a disadvantage, without any chance to challenge or appeal the decision.

The need to transform current practice in relation to parents with a learning disability

In 2019, Oranga Tamariki attempted to uplift a newborn baby from the care of a young mother while she was still in the hospital following the recent birth of her child. A video documenting the uplift was published by a major news outlet in Aotearoa (Reid, 2019). The video gained significant public attention and led to growing distrust of Oranga Tamariki as further examples of bad practices were reported by the media (Boshier, 2020). In response, the Chief Ombudsman of Aotearoa - Judge Peter Boshier- conducted an investigation to identify “whether there were systemic issues with the Ministry’s practices for the removal of newborn pēpi under section 78 interim custody orders” (Boshier, 2020, p. 9). During this investigation, it was found that disabled parents experienced discrimination as well as denial of their rights in contravention of the UNCRPD (Boshier, 2020).

In response to the Ombudsman’s investigation, Oranga Tamariki reviewed their practice of s78 (Oranga Tamariki, 2022). In their review, the national child protection agency recognised the need to support parents with disabilities. While there had been a decrease in the total number of newborn babies uplifted by Oranga Tamariki between January 2021 and August 2021, out of the 21 cases, five (24%) mothers

and three (14%) fathers were identified as having “parenting needs associated with their cognitive functioning” (Oranga Tamariki, 2022, p.17). In total, 38% of uplifts involved parents with a learning disability (or some other form of cognitive impairment). This shows a disproportionately high number of parents with a learning disability experiencing the uplift compared to the prevalence of people with a learning disability in the general population, which is estimated to be 1-2% (Collings et al., 2017; Conder et al., 2010; Maulik et al., 2011). In addition, the Ombudsman’s investigation identified that in 19 out of the 21 reviewed cases, siblings of the uplifted pēpi also had some form of involvement with Oranga Tamariki, including 12 cases where the siblings were previously or concurrently in Oranga Tamariki’s care (Oranga Tamariki, 2022). While the review did not provide information on the level or type of previous Oranga Tamariki involvement with parents with a learning disability in the cases reviewed, this group of parents likely had some prior interaction with Oranga Tamariki.

Comparisons can be drawn between Māori mothers and parents with a learning disability in that both groups face a disproportionate rate of child removal. For non-Māori parents who face child removal, having a “learning disability” was one of the three most common reasons for child removal (Office of Child Commissioner, 2020). Available research into child removal experiences of Māori whānau and parents with learning disabilities reveals similar experiences and contexts. For example, both groups often faced poverty, poor access to health and social services, discrimination, and trauma (Franklin et al., 2022; Keddell et al., 2021; Stefánsdóttir et al., 2023; Tarleton & Turney, 2020; Zijlstra et al., 2023).

The literature has recognised ableism, racism, and classism as the structural issues underpinning these experiences of social disadvantage and life-long inequity (More, 2023; Spencer et al., 2024). Ableism, racism, and classism are associated with an increased risk of interventions from the child protection agency and the related risk of child removal (Keddell et al., 2021), leading to overt and covert bias in professionals’ attitudes and practice (Gur & Stein, 2018; Morris et al., 2026). As a result, those parents who are subjected to ableism, racism and classism are perceived as ‘less capable of parenting’ (Keddell, et al., 2022; More, 2023).

It is noteworthy that some of the root causes and contributing factors to economic insecurity that impact whānau and parents with learning disabilities are structural and societal issues and inequities that parents alone cannot ‘fix’. Therefore, child removal can be conceptualised as an individualised approach to these structural issues (Spencer et al., 2024). When parents with a learning disability are identified as “incapable parents”, they often feel blamed, disrespected and dehumanised by the child protection system (Collings et al., 2018; Rice et al., 2021). While child protection workers attempt to work in the child's best interest, they often lack an awareness of how the wellbeing of each whānau or family member and their children is interlinked (Faureholm, 2010). Child protection approaches are often based on deficit models, which fail to recognise or respect parents' strengths (Starke, 2022). Evidence shows that these assumptions about parents with a learning disability can lead to the State performing ‘pre-emptive’ child uplifts, without proof of neglect (Spencer et al., 2024). A recent case study report from Stefánsdóttir and colleagues (2023) highlights that parents with a learning disability often have to navigate the child protection system on top of parenting itself, which is an added stress for the family. This suggests that the child protection systems are not benefiting families, but rather causing additional struggles. Once a baby or child is removed from parents with learning disabilities, parents seldom or never receive any type of formal support again (MacLeod et al., 2022), nor is there a genuine commitment to or avenue for reunification (Lightfoot et al., 2017; Pacheco et al., 2022).

The grief associated with child removal and loss of parenting rights has long-term and significant impacts on parents with a learning disability (Janeslätt et al., 2019; Mayes & Llewellyn, 2012). Research has highlighted a lack of emotional support for parents who have had their children removed from their care. In the case of parents with a learning disability, this has often occurred because these parents have not been able to demonstrate “good enough” parenting, rather than because they have demonstrated unequivocally poor parenting (Mirfin-Veitch, 2010; Zijlstra et al., 2023). There has been a strong call for a shift in the way child protection systems operate to recognise how these structural issues impact the child, parent and wider family wellbeing and to offer support at the individual levels (Azar et al., 2012; Keddell et al., 2021; Rice et al., 2021; More, 2023; Spencer et al., 2024; Zijlstra et al., 2023).

Key messages

- Despite pervasive and incorrect assumptions, having a learning disability is not necessarily associated with poor parenting.
- Parents with a learning disability are disproportionately impacted by ableism and conscious and unconscious biases relating to their parenting ability (Morris et al., 2026).
- Parents with learning disabilities are often assumed to be incapable of being good parents without the opportunity to develop and demonstrate their parenting skills (Jones, 2013; Joreskog & Starke, 2013; Sigurjónsdóttir et al., 2022; Spencer et al., 2024).
- These biased perceptions are often compounded by the contextual factors that parents with learning disabilities face, including disadvantaged socioeconomic status, social isolation, and poorer mental and physical health outcomes (Franklin et al., 2022; Stefánsdóttir et al., 2023).
- While the grief caused by child removal is significant, there is no ongoing support for parents with learning disabilities to navigate and learn to live with that experience.

Support for parents with learning disabilities

There is increased attention to improving how parents with learning disabilities can be supported to fulfil their parenting roles (Collings et al., 2017; Tarleton & Turney, 2020; Zijlstra et al., 2023). Zijlstra and colleagues (2023) conducted a scoping review of parenting interventions in the first 1001 days of babies' lives. They identified seven key success factors for supporting parents with learning disabilities. Other studies have confirmed these factors (see relevant references for individual factors):

1. **Addressing external stressors:** Parents with learning disabilities are more likely to be young, a single parent, and experience financial insecurity, mental health challenges, and isolation. These contextual factors directly impact their parenting skills and intervention outcomes. Therefore, interventions and

support must consider the contextual elements and how stress factors can be removed (More, 2023).

2. **Early intervention:** Starting engagement and skill-sharing before and during pregnancy is critical. A preventive approach has consistently proven more effective than a crisis-driven approach (Nobuhara & Nagasawa, 2022).

3. **Relationship-based:** Collaborative and trusting relationships between parents with a learning disability and professionals. This requires a supportive attitude from professionals, as well as a tailored approach to the needs of the individual parent (Augsberger, 2021; MacLeod et al., 2022; Randell et al., 2025; Starke, 2022).

4. **A rights-based approach:** Professionals must know and uphold the rights of the child to be safe, the rights of the parents with a learning disability to form a family and raise a child, and the government's duty and responsibility to provide support for these families (More, 2023; Stefánsdóttir et al., 2022).

5. **Skills-based:** Intervention should focus on developing and improving the parenting skills of parents with a learning disability by encouraging positive behaviour and modelling, providing feedback, praise, or tangible reinforcement, and conducting task analysis (Augsberger et al., 2021; Zijlstra et al., 2023).

6. **Setting of support:** Comprehensive support is critical; it needs to be offered at home, long-term, regularly, and intensively (Augsberger et al., 2021; Lightfoot & DeZelarb, 2022; More, 2023; Stefánsdóttir et al., 2023).

7. **Collaboration:** According to the parents' relationships and wishes, support should occur in collaboration with informal networks such as the wider family, as well as other specialist services such as disability support services (Augsberger et al., 2021; Aunos & Pacheco, 2021; Rosenthal et al., 2022; Randell et al., 2025; Tarleton & Turney, 2020).

Relevant best practice guidelines (for instance, in the UK) and the UNCRPD affirm these key elements (United Nations, 2006; University of Bristol & Esmee Fairbairn Foundation, 2021). Zijlstra and colleagues (2023) reviewed six parenting

programmes to support parents with a learning disability. Four programmes were home-based training; two were group-based collaboration for parents with a learning disability to improve their parenting skills. Although only one programme had incorporated all seven key elements, all programmes showed positive outcomes in parenting skills and broader contextual stress factors. As a result, these programmes could potentially reduce care concerns for parents with a learning disability, highlighting that these parents can learn and improve their parenting skills given the opportunity and adequate support.

Other parenting interventions have reported similar positive outcomes. For instance, in an initiative called Project Impact, parents with a learning disability were visited and supported several times a week for six months to learn and improve their parenting skills and other life skills, such as budgeting and house chores. The program resulted in a 91% reduction in child removal in one year after the parents attended the program. The parents and workers indicated they wished the program could last longer. Disability support coordinators and social workers involved with the parents shared that they couldn't have built the type of relationship that Project Impact workers could create because of time constraints, and they appreciated the difference a positive relationship can make (Augsberger et al., 2021). It should be noted that successful intervention programmes are often focused on parents with a learning disability who have been able to retain their babies beyond their birth. Research shows that parents with a learning disability are more likely to have their babies removed at birth (Pérez-Curiel et al., 2023). Therefore, programmes that support these parents before and during pregnancy and after childbirth must be developed.

Furthermore, informal support from trusted family and friends is known to be a key factor in successful parenting among parents with a learning disability (McConnell et al., 2022; Rosenthal et al., 2022; Starke, 2022; Stefánsdóttir et al., 2023; Threlfall et al., 2025). This support is also important while dealing with child protection agencies. When parents with a learning disability could demonstrate broader social support, they were more likely to keep their children in their care (Stefánsdóttir et al., 2023).

However, many parents with learning disabilities report they do not have appropriate informal support from their families - due to socialisation; equally, these parents do

not receive formal support (Franklin et al., 2022; Threlfall, 2025). Parents with learning disabilities often report negative experiences and dissatisfaction from the interactions they have with social workers and other professionals who work for child protection agencies (Starke, 2022; Stefánsdóttir et al., 2023). On the other hand, parents with learning disabilities identified legal professionals and advocates as 'secret weapons' who could support them in critical situations and expressed positive experiences (Stefánsdóttir et al., 2023). The differences in the experiences of the relationship between social workers and advocates indicate how the nature of the role shapes their interactions. While social workers are expected to work for the 'best interest of the child', research indicates that children who are placed out-of-home often experience negative outcomes in life (Augsberger et al., 2021). Therefore, it might be in the interest of children to have their parents with a learning disability provided with adequate support and resources so that the family can stay together. This will, in turn, require long-term, relationship-based and tailored support (Augsberger et al., 2021; More, 2023; Morris, 2026; Tarleton & Turney, 2020; Stefánsdóttir et al., 2022).

Key messages

- There is strong evidence for what parents with a learning disability consider effective and successful support.
- Effective support is comprehensive, long-term, relationship-based and tailored.
- There is strong evidence that confirms these elements of effective support.
- Support should begin before and during pregnancy and continue after childbirth.

Experiences of children of parents with a learning disability

There has been limited research on the life outcomes of children raised by a parent(s) with a learning disability. While some studies suggest that these children might have developmental delays and behavioural problems (Leaviss et al., 2011), there is no clear evidence of differences in life outcomes for these children (Conder

et al., 2019). Moreover, when adjusted for the parent's socioeconomic status, the differences between children of parents with and without a learning disability are often diminished, indicating that the outcome is more likely dependent on societal factors rather than the parents' disability (Conder et al., 2019).

Adult children of parents with a learning disability report a common experience of being bullied and stigmatised by other children at school. Still, most of them highlighted the love and warmth they felt from their parents growing up and maintained positive connections throughout their adulthood (Leaviss et al., 2011). In addition, their negative experiences are underpinned by the societal attitude towards disability rather than the individual characteristics of children of parents with a learning disability.

Informal and consistent support to both the parent and the child(ren) has been associated with positive outcomes for the children of parents with learning disabilities (Gudkova et al., 2019). Additionally, the limited research exploring the role of formal support in children of parents with a learning disability, while based on small qualitative research, indicates the positive impacts of formal support in children's lives. This research identified the importance of formal support in recognising the child's unique needs separately from the parent, and in maintaining relationships and connections with their parents and home. Another key aspect of the formal support in this study was that the relationship was long-term (Collings et al., 2017).

Key messages

- Research about the outcomes of children of parents with a learning disability is limited.
- The negative experiences of these children are largely due to systemic issues such as financial inequality and negative societal attitudes.
- Children of parents with a learning disability shared the affection and warmth they felt growing up.
- Consistent formal and informal support for the child and parent is known to have a positive impact.

Kupu Whakamutaka / Conclusion

There is a well-developed evidence base on how to support parents with a learning disability to fulfil their parenthood roles, duties, and responsibilities (Conder et al., 2019; Clement, 2018; Tarleton & Turney, 2020; Zijlstra et al., 2023). Key support elements are relationship-based, long-term, and multidisciplinary (Augsberger et al., 2021; Stefánsdóttir et al., 2023; Tarleton & Turney, 2020; Zijlstra, 2023). The support network should also involve legal professionals and disability support people, and any parenting skill training should be tailored to parents' needs (Augsberger et al., 2021; Rosenthal et al., 2022; Starke, 2022; Stefánsdóttir et al., 2023; Tarleton & Turney, 2020). Finally, a framework is needed to embed the elements of support at a systemic level as well as to eliminate the biases that are associated with parenting by people with a learning disability.

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