

Support, childcare needed for mothers of kids with intellectual disability

January 5 2015, by Michelle Wheeler



Mothers of children with Down Syndrome are no more likely to suffer from psychiatric disorders than other mothers, says Ms Fairthorne. Credit: Rich Johnson

Extra support, education and childcare services are needed to address a high rate of mental health problems in mothers of children with intellectual disabilities, research suggests.

A study of WA women who gave birth between 1983 and 2005 found

those who had a child with a mild [intellectual disability](#) of unknown cause were more than twice as likely as other [mothers](#) to suffer from a psychiatric disorder following the birth.

The research used hospital and outpatient records to compare more than 250,000 women who had no history of [psychiatric disorders](#) before the arrival of their child.

Telethon Kids Institute PhD student Jenny Fairthorne, who led the study, says the burden of caring for a child with a disability is obviously a large factor, but previous research also indicates there may be a genetic link between schizophrenia and intellectual disability.

"These common genetics, combined with the trigger of having a really challenging job caring for a child with a disability, might have increased the incidence as well," she says.

"And not to know what's wrong... more than half the time parents never find out what's caused their child's disability, and sometimes they don't get the diagnosis until after the child starts school."

Five times the rate of affective disorders

The study found mothers of a child with a mild intellectual disability of unknown cause were almost three and a half times more likely to suffer from a schizoid disorder and almost three times more likely to suffer from alcohol and substance abuse.

These mothers also had more than five times the rate of affective disorders, such as depression.

Ms Fairthorne says mothers of children with Down Syndrome were very resilient, and were no more likely to suffer from psychiatric disorders

than other mothers.

"I think part of it is that nowadays a lot of the time parents have a choice, not always, and their child is usually diagnosed on day one," she says.

"From that moment I understand that there's great agency support, and they can network with other mothers.

"Down Syndrome children also tend to be quite loving."

Ms Fairthorne says mothers of children with intellectual [disabilities](#) can face societal stigma due to a lack of understanding, increased financial pressure and difficulty accessing childcare in addition to the stress of caring for a [child](#) with a disability.

"I think it's important to offer mothers support, and also to educate the community about the burden that these women have through no fault of their own," she says.

More information: Jenny Fairthorne, Peter Jacoby, Jenny Bourke, Nick de Klerk, Helen Leonard, "Onset of maternal psychiatric disorders after the birth of a child with intellectual disability: A retrospective cohort study," *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, Available online 26 November 2014, ISSN 0022-3956, [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychires.2014.11.011](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychires.2014.11.011).

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