Title: The Mental Health of Father Carers of a Son or Daughter with Intellectual Disabilities: A Meta-Analysis

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Introduction: There is a growing body of research on the mental health of mothers who care for a son/daughter with intellectual disabilities (Cairns et al, 2013; Esbenson et al, 2006; Hastings et al, 2006). As research in this area has primarily focused on mother carers, much less is known about fathers. This is a particularly timely investigation as fathers are increasingly taking a more active caring role within the family (Dillenburger et al, 2009). The purpose of this study was to summarise the evidence related to the mental health of father carers compared to mother carers, and to fathers in the general population.

Method: A meta-analysis was undertaken of all studies published between 01/01/2001 and 01/07/2017 in MEDLINE, PsychINFO, CINAHL and EMBASE using terms on intellectual disabilities, mental health and father carers. Papers were selected based on pre-defined inclusion/exclusion criteria.

Results: Of 5,544 results, 7 studies met the inclusion criteria and had appropriate data for the meta-analysis. As papers examined different measures of mental health, the included papers were divided into those which measured depression, stress, anxiety, and general mental health. Significant effects were found for the following comparisons: The pooled effect size (95% CI) of depression among fathers carers vs mother carers was -0.30 (-0.45, -0.15) with marked heterogeneity ($I^2=85\%$) using the random-effects model. The pooled effect size (95% CI) of general mental health among father carers vs mother carers was -0.38 (-0.63, -0.13) with heterogeneity ($I^2=0\%$) using the fixed effects model. Non-significant results were found for the following comparisons: The pooled effect size (95% CI) of stress among fathers carers vs mother carers was -0.07 (-0.22, 0.09) with marked heterogeneity ($I^2=69\%$) using the fixed-effects model. The pooled effect size (95% CI) of anxiety among fathers carers vs mother carers was -0.00 (-0.25, 0.25) with heterogeneity ($I^2=0\%$) using the fixed-effects model. The pooled effect size (95% CI) of depression among fathers carers vs fathers in the general population was 0.06 (-0.21, 0.09) with marked heterogeneity ($I^2=90\%$) using the random-effects model.

Discussion: The results indicated that there is a significant difference between studies comparing depression and general mental health of father and mother carers, with fathers exposed to a lower risk of depression or poor general mental health. However, this is based on a small number of studies due to the difficulty in locating studies which met our inclusion criteria and were appropriate for meta-analysis. More data is needed in order to determine whether the mental health of father carers of a son/daughter with intellectual disabilities differs from fathers in the general population.

References/Citations: