Disability and Child Protection: Towards a Better Understanding

Webinar: 10:00am-11.00am (Dublin Ireland time), Friday 26th March 2021
School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin

Across the world, keeping children safe is an ethical imperative, practical necessity and legal requirement. In this context, disability is associated with unique vulnerabilities that relate to child abuse and neglect. This can include a higher vulnerability to abuse and neglect for children with disabilities, or higher likelihood of child protection investigation for parents with intellectual disabilities. The complexity that surrounds disability and child protection is often also compounded by the emotionally difficult nature of this subject matter. This international webinar provides an opportunity to explore further the area of disability and child protection, and as a result, arrive at a better understanding.

Speakers:

Dr. Susan Collings, Research Fellow and Program Lead, The University of Sydney

Catherine Rossiter, Advocate and Parent

Dr. Susan Flynn, Asst. Professor, Trinity College Dublin

Chair:

Dr. Cate Thomas, Assoc. Professor, Charles Sturt University

<u>Program of Speakers:</u>

'Parents as peer advocates: The voices of parents with intellectual disability in child protection system change' delivered by Dr Susan Collings

Abstract: International evidence demonstrates that parents with intellectual disability and their children face disproportionate child protection involvement and higher rates of child removal than other parents. Negative attitudes by statutory and legal professionals about parent capacity compound existing structural and social barriers and lead to systems abuse of these families. Professional advocacy has been shown to improve parents experience of court proceedings and is a form of necessary adjustment to achieve equity before the law required under the UNCRDP (Article 13). There is also growing recognition of the value of peer support for these parents. Promising evidence has emerged from parent-led reforms in child welfare in the United States that indicates parent-led advocacy can play an important role in preventing unnecessary separation of children from their families and improve experiences for parents and professionals. To date, these reform efforts have not specifically addressed, or been modified for inclusion of parents with intellectual disability. This presentation will explore how to ensure the voices of parents with intellectual disability are heard in decisionmaking and that adjustments are made to ensure authentic participation in child welfare policy reforms.

'Disability and Child Protection' by Catherine Rossiter

Abstract: All children need child protection and for children with disabilities and complex needs the need for child protection is even more critical. Some difficulties can occur with Family Law around child protection as unfortunately solicitors, barristers and members of the judiciary are not always as well informed as might be hoped for about what a child's disability means and how this child can be protected while also ensuring the best quality of life for the children and their families. The current gaps that exist in Irish law around child protection for children with disabilities is very evident in the fact that no state monitored or state run agency currently protects and supervises children who are the subject of a court appointed supervised access order. Currently no support is available to protect children with disabilities leaving these children even more vulnerable despite being under the protection of a court order designed to protect them. This webinar session will share the view of one parent of a child with disability, who following 2 years of research has some suggestions about how this gap can be addressed to protect children with disabilities.

'Child Protection and Disability: The Value of Affirmative Thinking' by Dr Susan Flynn

Abstract: There is existing evidence that the way in which professionals such as child protection workers, as well as members of the general public, think about disability, can be problematic in a child protection context. The idea that families who have disability and are involved with child protective services, ought to afforded service supports to overcome the issues presenting, is one that has had powerful influence in this area. Moreover, this idea is one that might be associated with a social model of disability in proposing that problems that people with disabilities face are caused by the societies around them that can exclude and disadvantage them. In this talk, one extension to this social model is presented through drawing on the work of French and Swain (2000, 2008). It is suggested that we also must address and challenge the impact of negative 'tragedy' thinking in the area to achieve a fairer and more balanced perspective, on the challenging and complex arena of disability and child protection.

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