**Abstract**

Background. Parents with learning disabilities are often assessed as lacking capacity to parent effectively; however, ecological models of parenting indicate that support from informal social networks (ISNs) can help them in successfully maintaining family life. This systematic review examined evidence regarding: 1) parent and child outcomes associated with support from ISNs, and 2) perceptions of the roles of ISNs for parents with learning disabilities.

Methods. Peer-reviewed quantitative and qualitative literature was identified through a search of six databases, and a narrative synthesis subsequently conducted.

Results. Twenty-six articles were included in the review. Findings of the quantitative synthesis provided preliminary evidence for a positive relationship between support from ISNs and parental mental health, positive parenting practices, and child well-being. The qualitative synthesis indicated that parents benefited from ISNs through their provision of practical and emotional support, and learning skills. Network characteristics that divided supportive from unsupportive members were also identified.

Conclusion. Parents with learning disabilities receive the same positive outcomes from ISNs as other parents, although unique contextual and social challenges may affect their experiences. Future research should explore interventions to build the ISNs of parents with learning disabilities that acknowledge their existing strengths as parents and community members.

**Accessible summary:**

* We wanted to find out what research tells us about how family, friends, and neighbours support parents with learning disabilities to look after their children.
* The research shows there is some evidence that support from family, friends and neighbours helps parents with learning disabilities and their children feel better and have a better relationship with each other.
* The research also shows that parents with learning disabilities experience benefits from supportive people in their lives. Sometimes parents with learning disabilities also experience difficult relationships with family, friends and neighbours, which did not help them look after their children.
* More research needs to be done on helping parents with learning disabilities to build strong and positive relationships with the people around them. This will help parents with learning disabilities get support, but also become part of their communities.

**The Role of Informal Social Networks in Supporting Parents with Learning Disabilities:**

**A Systematic Review**

**Introduction**

It is well established internationally that families where parents have learning disabilities are over-represented within child protection systems (Llewellyn & Hindmarsh, 2015). Although difficult to accurately quantify, a range of studies in different countries over the years have found that 40-60% of children born to parents with learning disabilities will be removed from their care (Collings & Llewellyn, 2012; Lima et al, 2022). This poses the foundational question of whether the children of parents with learning disabilities are necessarily disadvantaged when compared to children in the general population. The research literature paints a mixed picture. with little consensus across studies on whether having a parent with learning disabilities necessarily results in developmental, behavioural, or social disadvantage (Collings & Llewellyn, 2012; Hindmarsh et al, 2016; Schuengel et al, 2017). The literature on children’s experiences of maltreatment in families where parents have learning disabilities is similarly ambiguous. In their analysis of American administrative data, Slayter and Jensen (2019) found that children of parents with learning disabilities were more likely to have experienced psychological/emotional abuse, but equally or less likely to have experienced physical abuse, neglect, or sexual abuse than children where parents did not have learning disabilities. However, the same authors also conclude “the presence of parental intellectual disability may be more of a risk indicator as opposed to a risk factor for child maltreatment” (p. 303).

Evidence on child outcomes and maltreatment for the children of parents with learning disabilities has to be contextualised within the socioeconomic circumstances of such families. Indeed, it has been posited that the outcomes literature is ambiguous because of the complexities inherent in teasing out the influence of parental learning disability from environmental determinants (Collings and Llewellyn, 2012; Zijlstra et al, 2024). As Llewellyn and Hindmarsh (2015) point out, the literature on parents with learning disabilities has tended to underplay contextual factors, in contrast to the literature on parenting more generally. If we take parenting as an activity, rather than focusing on *who* carries it out, a common theme across this broader literature is that parenting is best understood within an ecological and relational framework where the fundamental nature of parenting as an interdependent undertaking is acknowledged (Jack, 2000). Parents with learning disabilities and their children need, and benefit from, the same kinds of interpersonal and environmental resources as all families do. However, economic disadvantage, stigma, social isolation, discrimination, and lower access to social capital are all more prevalent for parents with learning disabilities (Aunos and Pacheco, 2020; Emerson et al., 2015). These factors both directly and indirectly shape child outcomes, in the latter sense mediated through various dimensions of parental well-being. In turn, the presence of social support systems that meet psychosocial and material needs can mitigate aspects of adverse environmental factors, and successfully promote positive parent and child well-being, parental capacity, and child development (Tarleton & Turney, 2020; Wilson et al., 2014).

 Professional or ‘formal’ support can be an important part of the social support systems of parents with learning disabilities; however, gaining access to and benefiting from such support can be challenging. Parents with learning disabilities in the previously mentioned Slayter and Jensen (2019) study were significantly less likely than parents without learning disabilities to be given access via child welfare professionals to broader support and services. Some child welfare professionals can hold negative perceptions of the capacity of parents with learning disabilities to be ‘good enough’ parents, with assumptions being made on the risk of adverse events and outcomes (Macintyre et al, 2019). Such perceptions may be underpinned by inequitable expectations around the capacity of parents with learning disabilities to manage. Despite it being widely accepted that parental capacity is mediated by input from significant others, parents with learning disabilities are often required to evidence their ability to parent without assistance (Pacheco et al, 2021). Where professionals also lack confidence and knowledge in the area of learning disability, this can further embed their sense of ‘hopelessness’ regarding parental ability to maintain successful family life (Lewis et al, 2015). Parents with learning disabilities may also struggle to engage with child welfare professionals for a number of reasons, including fear of the possible consequences of intervention such as child removal; a mismatch between their understanding of their family’s needs and what professionals perceive the key issues to be; and challenges with communication, such as inaccessible information about what is expected of and available to them (Koolen et al., 2020). In view of these challenges, parents may prefer to seek support from other, less formal, sources.

 Parents’ informal social networks (ISNs) are composed of their connections with family, friends, neighbours, other parents, and other individuals who form part of their communities. ISNs may vary considerably both in their size, stability, and in the strength of relationships within them, depending on a parent’s individual characteristics and social position within their community. ISNs typically consist of both ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ ties (Granovetter, 1973), with the former typically being characterised by intimacy and obligation, and the latter eliciting a generalised sense of belonging and serendipitous access to diverse resources and information (Moreton et al, 2023). Parents’ ISNs are important because they are the context in which informal social support may be offered and received. They are often the first port of call for families when they need support and informal networks can be both strengthened by and contribute to the work of formal professional-based networks in family lives (Thompson, 2015). Informal social support refers to “the various kinds of assistance a person receives from and gives to the individuals in that person’s social network” (Spilsbury & Korbin, 2013, p.9). The assistance parents derive from their social networks can be multifaceted and include instrumental support (e.g., sharing resources, giving advice, providing childcare) and/or emotional support. It is important to recognise, however, that the mere presence of an ISN does not automatically lead to the exchange of social support. Interactions within certain social relationships may convey, for example, a lack of interest or even antagonism (Vangelisti, 2009), perceptions of support can differ between giver and receiver, and members of ISNs can have limited capacity to offer support dependent on their own circumstances (Thompson, 2015). Indeed, ISNs can be actively deleterious when they undermine the protective capacity of parents and perpetuate harmful practices either directly or indirectly through influencing parent behaviour (Fong, 2017). Despite these important distinctions, within much of the literature, the terms ‘social network’ and ‘social support’ are used interchangeably (Spilsbury & Korbin, 2013).

ISNs and informal social support have generally been associated with positive parent and child outcomes in the wider parenting literature, with informal social support having a stronger association with positive outcomes than formal social support (Dunst, 2023). A systematic review focusing on low income mothers indicated that informal support had consistently been related with maternal psychological health and well-being, positive parenting behaviours, improved child cognition and behaviour, and family well-being (Radey, 2018). The author noted, however, that a minority of reviewed studies indicated that social support was promotive of harsh parenting practices, and hypothesise that this may be because the effects of social support are difficult to disentangle from the characteristics of ISNs, which as noted above, are not always conducive to positive parenting practices. Reviews that have examined the empirical literature on aspects of social support specifically for parents with learning disabilities have found: a correlation between parental psychological well-being and social support (Darbyshire & Stenfert Kroese, 2012); positive but limited evidence on interventions to promote social support (Wilson et al, 2014) and key differences between parent and professional perceptions of social support needs (Koolen et al., 2020). However, there has not yet been a synthesis of the role that ISNs play in supporting parents with learning disabilities or in promoting child well-being. Additionally, no previous review has examined the quantitative and the qualitative literature concurrently to more fully understand the potentially complex role that ISNs and social support may play in the lives of parents with learning disabilities. This systematic review therefore addresses the following questions:

* + What parent/child outcomes are associated with informal social networks for parents with learning disabilities?
	+ How do parents with learning disabilities and the professionals who work with them perceive the role of informal social networks in parenting?

Before going further, it is important to offer a note on terminology and definitions. Learning disabilities are defined internationally as intellectual and social/adaptive impairments that begin in childhood (Emerson & Heslop, 2010). This overall definition encompasses a broad range of functioning, but parents with learning disabilities typically have mild or borderline impairment (IASSIDD Special Interest Research Group on Parents and Parenting with Intellectual Disabilities, 2008). The term learning disability is adopted throughout the paper except when directly referring to an article included in the review where other internationally preferred terms (e.g., intellectual disability) may be used.

**Method**

**Search strategy**

Six databases (ASSIA, MEDLINE, PsychINFO, Scopus, Social Policy and Practice, and Social Services Abstracts) were searched using terms relating to parents (parent, mother, father), learning disabilities (learning difficulty or disability; intellectual difficulty, disability, or impairment; mental retardation, disability, or impairment; developmental disability or difficulty; cognitive impairment or disability), and social networks (social network, support, capital, participation, isolation, connection, inclusion, relation, involvement, resource, or asset; informal, emotional, psychological, or peer support). The search terms were constructed to represent the international and historical development of the key concepts in the review. A hand search was also conducted of relevant journals. The reference lists of articles that met the inclusion criteria were also reviewed to ensure that no relevant literature was missed. The search was completed in January 2024.

**Selection Criteria**

Empirical, peer-reviewed and English language articles were included in the review if they examined the effects of ISNs on the parenting experiences of adults with learning disabilities and/or their children. ISNs were broadly conceptualised to include both the networks that parents were part of and the support that they received from them. The review includes studies that use quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods study designs in order to provide a comprehensive synthesis of the available evidence. Quantitative articles were included if it was possible to isolate the effect of a variable representing the parents’ ISNs on any outcome related to the parent as an individual or to their child. Qualitative articles were included in the review if themes relating to the influence of informal social networks on parenting were clearly described in the results (Jones, 2004). To ensure the inclusion of all relevant evidence, no restriction was placed on publication date. Records were screened through title or abstract by the first author. The remaining articles were read independently by the first and second authors against the selection criteria, with a 100% interrater agreement.

**Quality appraisal**

The methodological rigour of the included studies was assessed through an adapted version of the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (Hong et al., 2018). The MMAT is designed to be used for systematic reviews that include more than one type of study design (i.e., quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies). Quantitative articles were appraised according to five criteria: random or probability sample; sample size adequate and representative; appropriate measurements; confounding factors identified; and appropriate statistical analysis. Qualitative articles were appraised according to six criteria: clear and appropriate qualitative approach; appropriate sampling method; influence of the researcher considered; adequate data collection methods; appropriate analysis; and interpretation substantiated by data. Each criterion was scored as ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Two members of the research team independently applied the instrument to each article. Disagreements between the raters were minimal and were resolved through discussion. In accordance with its original design, the adapted MMAT was not used to calculate an overall quality rating for each study but rather to indicate quality across each criterion, and therefore give a sense of methodological strengths and weaknesses in the field as a whole.

**Data extraction and synthesis**

Data were extracted using a template designed specifically for the review. To avoid bias in the process, two team members independently completed the template for each study and resolved any discrepancies through discussion. In view of the diverse methodologies represented in the included studies, a narrative synthesis was selected as the most appropriate means of analysis. Narrative synthesis employs a textual approach to summarising and drawing conclusions from evidence gleaned from reviewed studies (Popay et al., 2006). First, initial textual descriptions of the studies were developed and relevant and/or unusual outcomes or themes were noted. Next, evidence across studies was explored. To conduct the quantitative synthesis patterns across study characteristics and findings were explored. These were grouped together conceptually in order that relationships between variables key to the review (ISN, parent outcomes, child outcomes) could be considered (Popay et al., 2006). The qualitative synthesis was conducted using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). When used in a systematic review, thematic analysis enables the researcher to organise and make sense of qualitative literature. Each article was coded independently by two team members with the assistance of the qualitative data analysis software, NVivo 12. Commonly used codes were then combined to create themes that spoke to the role of ISNs in the lives of parents with learning disabilities. In the final stage of the analysis, relationships between the themes identified in the quantitative and the qualitative syntheses were explored.

**Results**

The search process yielded 26 articles representing 23 unique studies. Seven of the articles reported an analysis of quantitative data, a further 17 reported qualitative analyses, and the remaining two were based on mixed methods research. A more detailed description of the search process is documented in Figure 1. The included articles were published between 1989 and 2023 and describe research conducted in Australia (n=7), the United Kingdom (n=4), Canada (n=3), Iceland (n=2), Poland (n=2), Sweden (n=2), the United States (n=2), Austria (n=1), Israel (n=1), the Netherlands (n=1), and Spain (n=1). Tables 1 and 2 provide overviews of the quantitative and qualitative articles respectively. The two mixed methods articles (Ehlers-Flint, 2002; Stenfert Kroese et al., 2002) are included in both tables.

**Quantitative Synthesis**

Of the nine articles incorporating some quantitative methods in their analyses, two reported baseline data from the same intervention study (Wade et al., 2011, 2015). The remainder reported data from unique studies.

The main areas of weakness for the quantitative studies included in the review related to sampling. While all of the articles described a sampling strategy that was representative of the target population, and stated clear inclusion and exclusion criteria, the authors of all but four acknowledged limitations due to sample size (Feldman et al., 2012; Meppelder et al., 2015; Wade et al., 2011, 2015). Moreover, only one article reported on data obtained from a random or probability sample (Feldman et al., 2012). Another area of weakness was the appropriateness of the measurements used for the variables of interest. While six of the articles made use of measures with documented reliability and validity, only three reported that the psychometric properties of the measures had been tested with people with learning disabilities (Aunos et al., 2008; Meppelder et al., 2015; Stenfert Kroese et al., 2002). All of the included articles used appropriate statistical analyses given the type of data and sample size. However, only four made use of any strategy to manage or account for confounding factors (Feldman et al., 2012; McConnell et al., 2011; Wade et al., 2011, 2015).

***Operationalisation of Informal Social Network Support***

The most common operationalisations of ISN support were either network size (n=4) or absence/ unavailability of support (n=3). Other measures in the reviewed studies included items relating to how participants experienced social support (i.e., satisfaction, helpfulness; n=4). In two cases, social support was considered to be a multidimensional concept, including for example, general, family, and emotional support (Lindberg et al., 2017). Details of the ISN variables and measures used in the articles are given in Table 1.

***Parent and Child Outcomes of Informal Social Networks***

The most frequently examined outcomes related to parenting practices, style, or stress associated with the parenting role (n=9) and provided mixed evidence for their association with ISNs. Wade et al. (2011, 2015) used baseline data from the Australian Healthy Start parenting intervention trial to construct a structural equation model of the influences of various contextual variables, including social support, on parenting practices and child well-being. Study findings indicated that parents who could access support when they needed it reported feeling more warmth towards their child, were involved in more activities with their child, and were more satisfied with the way in which they are taking care of them. Mothers’ satisfaction with their social support was also found to be positively related to the frequency of their positive interactions with their children in a Canadian study of 30 mothers with intellectual disabilities (Feldman et al., 2002). Network size was not, however, found to have the same association.

Neither network size nor satisfaction with support was found to be related to parenting style (positive parenting, hostile parenting, inconsistent/ ineffective parenting) or to the quality of parent-child interactions in another small mother-focused study (Aunos et al., 2008). Similarly, the recency and helpfulness of support contacts was not associated with maternal sensitivity in a sample of 20 mothers with mild intellectual disabilities (Lindberg et al., 2017). Last, no evidence was found for an association between any dimension of social support and attitudes to parenting practices or attitudes to the parenting role (Ehlers-Flint, 2002; Stenfert Kroese et al., 2002).

It appears that ISNs can ameliorate parenting stress in certain circumstances. Feldman et al. (2002) found that greater social network satisfaction, but not size, was correlated with a reduction in parenting stress. Another study indicated a moderating role for social network size, in that parents with smaller networks were more vulnerable to experiencing stress as a result of their children’s behavioural problems (Meppelder et al., 2015)**.**

Three articles included in the review examined the potential relationship between parental mental health or well-being and ISNs. The structural equation model constructed by Wade et al. (2015) indicated a direct and positive relationship between parents’ access to social support and parental mental health. Similarly, Feldman et al. (2012) in an analysis of the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect found that parents with few social supports are more likely to have mental health issues. Last, the size of parents’ social network was found to be correlated with subjective well-being and happiness and the recency of contact with their social network with self-esteem (Stenfert Kroese et al., 2002).

Three articles, representing two studies, reported on child well-being outcomes predicted by ISNs. These studies suggest preliminary evidence for an indirect relationship between social support and child well-being. Feldman et al. (2012) in their analysis of the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect reported that the children of parents with few social supports are more likely to have emotional and/or behavioural issues and that this relationship is mediated by parental mental health. A different mechanism was reported by Wade et al. (2011) who found that parenting practices mediated the relationship between parents’ access to support and child developmental and behavioural-emotional problems. The same authors found evidence for a more complex model in a more recent analysis (Wade et al., 2015) in which parental mental health played a prominent role. The analysis indicated an indirect path between parents’ access to support and child well-being through parental mental health and various parenting behaviours (parenting efficacy, warmth, irritability, involvement).

**Qualitative Studies**

The 19 qualitative articles included in the review report data from 17 unique studies. Two articles (Collings et al., 2020; Strnadová et al., 2019) report separate analyses of the same larger study of mothers who had experienced domestic violence or had a child taken into care.

The quality appraisal of the qualitative articles indicated some common areas of methodological weakness. Only around half of the studies (n=10) explicitly identified the qualitative approach used in the study (Collings et al., 2020; Ćwirynkało & Parchomiuk, 2023; Llewellyn, 1995; Mayes et al., 2008; More & Tarleton, 2022; Stefánsdóttir, Sigurjónsdóttir & Rice, 2023; Traustadóttir & Sigurjónsdóttir, 2008; Tucker & Johnson, 1989; Wilson et al., 2013; Wos & Baczała, 2021). Another area of weakness was the failure to consider how the role of the researcher might introduce bias; only eleven studies included a relevant discussion (Collings et al., 2020; Durling et al., 2018; Franklin et al, 2022; Gur & Stein, 2019;; Rio-Poncela & Rojas-Pernia, 2023; Stefánsdóttir, Sigurjónsdóttir & Rice, 2023; Stenfert Kroese et al., 2002; Strnadová et al., 2019; Traustadóttir & Sigurjónsdóttir, 2008; Wilson et al., 2013; Wos & Baczała, 2021. Some areas of common methodological strength were, however, identified. All but one article (Ehlers-Flint, 2002) met the criteria for evidencing transparent recruitment methods and providing sufficient substantiation for the study’s results.

Two major themes emerged from the narrative synthesis of the qualitative articles. The first of these, *Benefits of Informal Social Networks,* was concerned with the ways in which ISNs were perceived to lead to positive outcomes in the lives of parents with learning disabilities. The second major theme, *Characteristics of Supportive and Unsupportive Networks,* detailed specific attributes of network members that participants experienced as either contributing to the well-being of parent and child or as having a detrimental effect.

***Benefits of Informal Networks***

**Practical Support.** Practical support was often mentioned as a benefit of ISNs. Parents received assistance with looking after their children, financial support, material gifts such as baby clothes, and help with household tasks (Ćwirynkało & Parchomiuk, 2023; Gur & Stein, 2019; Llewellyn, 1995; Llewellyn et al., 1999; More & Tarleton, 2022; Mayes et al., 2008; Starke, 2022; Stefánsdóttir, Sigurjónsdóttir & Rice, 2023; Stenfert Kroese et al., 2002; Strnadová et al., 2019; Traustadóttir & Sigurjónsdóttir, 2008; Wilson et al., 2013; Wos & Baczała, 2021). Network members also helped parents to navigate through difficult circumstances. For example, Stenfert Kroese et al. (2002) reported participants’ experiences of being given a lift to the hospital or accompanied to a child’s medical appointment. Supporters also assisted parents in their contact with formal support systems. Traustadóttir and Sigurjónsdóttir (2008) described how network members helped parents to plan service provision, advocated for them within the system, and protected them from having their children removed from their care.

**Learning Skills.** Network members offered parents the opportunity to learn parenting and other life skills (Ćwirynkało & Parchomiuk, 2023; Durling et al., 2018; Llewellyn, 1995; More & Tarleton, 2022; Starke, 2022; Stenfert Kroese et al., 2002; Traustadóttir & Sigurjónsdóttir, 2008). For example, Strnadová et al. (2019) described how participants in a support group for mothers with intellectual disabilities learned “parenting, plumbing, anything that you need to know” (p.884). In gaining skills it was hoped that the parent would come to rely less on the support of the network member. Tucker and Johnson (1989) distinguished between competence promoting and competence inhibiting supporters. Competence promoting network members support parents to acquire the skills to become self-reliant. They “provide on-going instruction and supervision to effectively help the parent overcome difficulties on her or his own. The competence promoting support provider teaches functional skills which allow the parent to feel in control and to experience a greater sense of competence and success as a parent” (p.98).

**Emotional Support.** Belonging to a social network provided parents with emotional support. Family members and friends showed concern and were there to listen when the parent needed them (Llewellyn, 1995; Llewellyn et al., 1999; Starke, 2022; Strnadová et al., 2019). Wilson et al. (2013) for example, emphasised the saliency of emotional support provided by family members as participants in their study transitioned to motherhood in the days after giving birth. Spending time with network members also helped parents to manage their own emotions through informal conversations or peer support groups (Strnadová et al., 2019). Franklin et al. (2022) noted how peer support groups enabled mothers to develop emotional security through the modelling of trusting relationships. Participants in the included studies also emphasised the reciprocal nature of the support within their social networks; parents gained satisfaction from knowing that they could provide practical or emotional help to family members or friends (Collings et al., 2020; Llewellyn et al., 1999; Starke, 2022; Stenfert Kroese et al., 2002; Strnadová et al., 2019). The fathers in Ćwirynkało & Parchomiuk’s study (2023) described ‘repaying’ help, for example supporting their parents as they got older.

***Characteristics of Supportive and Unsupportive Networks***

**Availability.** Network members who were perceived to provide beneficial support were available to parents when they needed them. Participants in four studies described the importance of geographic proximity (Gur & Stein, 2019; Mayes et al., 2008; Starke, 2022). For example, Llewellyn (1995) described how parents saw physical closeness to family as akin to “back up moral support, even when this support was not utilized” (p.357). Strnadová et al. (2019) reported that although participants in their study preferred face to face support, they also valued supporters who were available via phone or social media. Availability also meant that network members had the time and energy to support parents in looking after their children. Tucker and Johnson (1989) described how supporters who provided the most substantial assistance to parents often had few external employment or family responsibilities. In contrast, unsupportive family members and other acquaintances were said to be too busy or tired (Collings et al., 2020; Llewellyn et al., 1999; Stenfert Kroese et al., 2002).

**Shared Experiences.** Parents also valued network members with whom they shared certain characteristics or experiences (Franklin et al, 2022; More & Tarleton, 2022). Strnadová et al. (2019) investigated parents’ perceptions of peer support and found that shared experiences such as having similarly aged children, having children with a disability, or growing up together were considered to be important. Writing about the same study, Collings et al. (2020) additionally noted how mothers in a peer support group for parents with intellectual disabilities valued the opportunity to have a mutually supportive relationship with others with similar experiences such as histories of intimate partner violence. Conversely, a lack of shared experiences could inhibit the receipt of support from network members. For example, another participant in the same study described how other mothers at a mainstream parenting group ignored her after realising that she had intellectual disabilities (Strnadová et al., 2019)***.***

**Trustworthiness.** Some network members were considered to be more trustworthy than others and therefore looked to more often for support. Llewellyn (1995) described how parents’ commitment to asking family members for advice about childcare was predicated on a sense of trust stemming from their relational bonds. Traustadóttir and Sigurjónsdóttir (2008) noted how parents looked to key supporters with whom they felt comfortable and whom they trusted the most. One mother expressed this trust as confidence that they would not “have the baby taken away” (p.335). In contrast, participants in a minority of studies indicated that they did not trust network members to undertake parenting tasks. Some of the parents in Starke’s (2022) study described untrustworthiness as network members being unreliable and lacking interest in their lives. Mayes et al. (2008) reported how two mothers in their study chose to end violent relationships for the safety of their children. One of the mothers concluded that her children would be more likely to become subject to child protection procedures if her own abusive mother remained central to her support network. Wilson et al. (2013) described how some mothers managed support from partners or family members who provided substandard care for their infant children, choosing whether or not to supervise the network member when they were with the child.

**Respect for Parenting Role.** Unhelpful network members were perceived to marginalise parents’ roles in their children’s lives. They were critical of the parenting capacity of parents with learning disabilities (Ehlers-Flint, 2002; Mayes et al., 2008;). Llewellyn (1995) described how participants in her study felt talked down to by judgemental network members and that their status as adults was disregarded. Similarly, the mothers in Rio-Poncela & Rojas-Pernia’s (2023) study perceived some friends and family as undermining their competence and having to continually ‘prove’ they could care for their children. Some parents also feared that critical family members could instigate child protection proceedings. For example, Collings et al. (2020) reported the experience of a mother who chose to keep her sister at arm's length, believing that she was responsible for the removal of her oldest children.

Parents were also reported in some studies to be restricted in the tasks that they could carry out for their children. In two studies this was related to the identity of participants. In Ćwirynkało & Parchomiuk’s (2023) study, fatherhood was linked to being disregarded as a caregiver by family networks, leading to feelings of anger and loss for participants. Durling et al. (2018) in their study of parents with intellectual disabilities in the UK Bangladeshi community describe how parents were accorded the role of playing with and loving their children, but not given the opportunity to engage in other activities that might build their independence. Although there were some successful ‘co-parenting’ arrangements with family members reported (Stefánsdóttir, Sigurjónsdóttir & Rice, 2023; Wos & Baczała D, 2021), parents’ roles could also be limited by the overinvolvement of certain network members. Grandparents in particular were criticised by participants in several studies as usurping the parental role (Collings et al., 2020; Mayes et al., 2008; Traustadóttir & Sigurjónsdóttir, 2008; Wade et al., 2015). For example, social workers in the study of Gur and Stein (2019) described grandparents attending medical appointments or parent-teacher meetings without parents’ knowledge. Participants in this study also described parents’ feelings of exclusion as a result of the close child-grandparent relationship. Similarly, Strnadová et al. (2019) report parents feeling that their parental authority was undermined by the ways in which grandparents interacted with their children or even restricted access to them.

**Discussion**

This systematic review examined the quantitative and qualitative evidence about the role of ISNs in the lives of parents with learning disabilities. Although the volume and quality of research is limited, preliminary evidence for an association between support from ISNs and positive parent and child outcomes was offered by the quantitative synthesis. The qualitative synthesis offered further insight into this relationship by providing evidence of the benefits that study participants believed to derive from ISNs. Furthermore, in identifying characteristics of supportive and unsupportive networks, the qualitative evidence provided some indication of factors that might interrupt the relationship between support from ISNs and positive parent and child outcomes. As a whole, the review indicates that ISNs operate in broadly the same way for parents with learning disabilities as for parents in the general population, although unique contextual and social challenges may affect the ways in which parents with learning disabilities experience network support.

The body of quantitative literature exploring the possible benefits of ISNs for parents with learning disabilities and their children is small; conclusions drawn from its synthesis are therefore tentative at best. With this caveat in mind, the most consistent finding in the quantitative synthesis was for the relationship between ISNs and parental psychological wellbeing. Increases in both access to and support from ISNs were found to be related to reductions in mental health problems and parenting related stress. The evidence supporting the association between ISNs and parenting practices was less consistent, although it is notable that studies included in this category used relatively disparate outcome measures and varied considerably in their methodological quality. Specifically, some studies may have lacked power to detect statistically significant relationships. Although the number of studies that included measures of child wellbeing as an outcome was limited, they provided consistent evidence of an indirect relationship with parental mental health and/or parenting practices serving as mediators. These models were similar to those found in the general parenting literature. For example, in a systematic review of low income mothers’ informal support, Radey (2018) found that ISNs had a direct relationship with child cognitive and behavioural outcomes as well as an indirect relationship through variables including maternal well-being and parenting behaviours. Being embedded in supportive social networks appears to have the potential to be similarly promotive of positive outcomes for parents with learning disabilities and their children as for other families.

The qualitative synthesis also indicated a number of benefits that parents with learning disabilities perceived as resulting from their ISNs. The benefits they identified, which included practical support, the opportunity to learn parenting and other life skills, and emotional support, reflect observations in the general parenting literature about the function of informal social support (Spilsbury & Korbin, 2013). In addition to their direct impact on parent and child outcomes, both instrumental and emotional support are theorised to reduce stress that may disrupt parenting (Crockenberg, 1988). For example, by advising on where to obtain essential resources or by providing them directly, network members who provide instrumental support may reduce parents’ economic stress. Similarly, the acceptance and empathy associated with emotional support may serve to alleviate the strain of both parenting and environmental stressors. This stress reducing function of informal social support may be especially important in the lives of parents with learning disabilities who disproportionately contend with the negative impact of economic disadvantage, social isolation, stigma, and discrimination (Darbyshire & Stenfert Kroese, 2012; Emerson et al., 2015).

The qualitative synthesis also added to our understanding of network member characteristics that parents with learning disabilities perceived to be beneficial to their parenting. Specifically, participants in the included studies valued individuals who were available, with whom they shared experiences, whom they perceived to be trustworthy, and who respected their parenting role. The presence of these characteristics meant that parents were more likely to receive the instrumental and emotional support they desired. Constrastingly, network members who were unavailable, untrustworthy, or who marginalised the role of the parent were apparent sources of stress. Their presence in the parent’s network was unlikely to contribute towards positive parent or child outcomes. This finding again accords with the wider theoretical literature which emphasises that some forms of social support can have a deleterious effect, perhaps inspiring disappointment or animosity in the intended recipient (Spilsbury & Korbin, 2013; Fong, 2017). Moreover, parents’ perceptions of certain network members as untrustworthy or marginalising may be understood within theoretical distinctions between the way in which support is differently perceived by its instigator and its recipient (Vangelisti, 2009). High levels of even well-intended support may be unwanted or experienced as intrusive. For example, some parents in the reviewed studies were cautious to trust members of their networks for fear of their own or their child’s safety (Mayes et al., 2008; Wilson et al., 2013).

An important finding of the qualitative synthesis was that network members were perceived to unduly judge parents or restrict their roles precisely because of their disability status. Support that is predicated upon such stigma is unlikely to produce positive parent or child outcomes. Specifically, parents in the reviewed studies were upset by what they perceived to be unwarranted criticism of their ability to look after their children. Previous research about social networks has demonstrated that relationships that are characterised by such conflict do not tend to produce the positive outcomes that may be expected from social support (Vangelisti, 2009). Moreover, in marginalising their parenting role, network members inevitably reduced the ability of parents with learning disabilities to learn and practice childcare tasks. Here, it is useful to employ the language of Tucker and Johnson (1988) who identify this type of social support as *competence inhibiting*. Parents were denied access to the opportunities they need to develop parenting competencies that would benefit themselves and their children alike.

**Implications of the Review**

Our systematic review findings suggest several directions for future research. First, it should be noted that while the body of literature reviewed spanned 11 countries, no study was conducted outside the global north. Further studies are required to explore the roles of ISNs in the lives of parents with learning disabilities in the global south. Second, although the quantitative synthesis provides some preliminary evidence for a positive relationship between ISNs and beneficial parent and child outcomes, the qualitative synthesis suggests a considerably more complex picture. It is evident, for example, that certain social network members may be sources of stress as well as of support. It is crucial therefore, that quantitative studies provide clarity about the way in which ISNs and social support are conceptualised and operationalised. There is a need also to recruit sufficient sample sizes to allow for the building of complex models that account for the ways in which certain network characteristics may buffer the relationship between ISNs and positive parent and child outcomes. The review also indicated that parents value network members according to their different characteristics such as their shared experiences and provision of practical support. Future studies might investigate if and how these are connected to specific network roles and strength of ties (e.g., family member, peer, neighbour). Relatedly, and as has been noted elsewhere (Koolen et al, 2020) studies should incorporate the perspectives of network members to better understand how support is provided. Last, the qualitative synthesis gave some indication that parents with learning disabilities may experience support from ISNs differently because of their disability status. Future research should explore more fully the impact of factors that disproportionately affect parents with learning disabilities such as poverty, isolation, and stigma on the formation and function of ISNs.

Evidence from the review about the positive impact of certain kinds of informal social support on parent and child outcomes indicates the importance of practitioners foregrounding ISNs in their strategies for working with parents with learning disabilities. In particular, practitioners should work with parents to identify network members who are promotive of their parenting and to increase opportunities to develop new supportive relationships. Unfortunately, previous research has demonstrated that even when practitioners recognise the importance of social inclusion for parents with learning disabilities and their children, they still may have little idea of how to mobilise informal support and default to providing formal services instead (Koolen et al, 2020; Rinaldi et al., 2023). Practitioners may therefore benefit from training in the nature and function of ISNs, with emphasis on the practical and emotional support that they can provide.

Practitioners should also be aware of evidence-based strategies for building parents’ ISNs. A previous systematic review of interventions provided to parents with learning disabilities provided some evidence for the effectiveness of group interventions to improve social relationships and certain other parent outcomes (Wilson et al., 2014). For example, a multisite evaluation of an Australian peer group intervention found that mothers with intellectual disability experienced reductions in psychological distress and improvements in their social relationships following their participation (McConnell et al., 2009). Peer group interventions may be a particularly productive direction for research in view of evidence from the current review that parents value relationships with others who share similar experiences to themselves (Collings et al., 2020; Strnadová et al., 2019). It is unlikely, however, that these or similar groups could replace the everyday, transactional nature of support that the qualitative literature indicates that parents with learning disabilities value.

In designing strategies to reduce social isolation, evidence from the qualitative synthesis about the value that parents place on ISN members’ respect for their parenting role should be considered. It is important that intervention strategies designed to foster parents’ social networks should not only provide parents with the connections they need to foster their parenting capacity but also build on their current strengths. A possibly fruitful direction for future research is asset based approaches. Asset based approaches focus on mobilising the strengths, skills, knowledge, and connections already present in a particular community (Foot & Hopkins, 2010). An important intended outcome is the growth of mutually beneficial social networks throughout the community of focus. Although there is no literature as yet that evidences their effectiveness with parents, a growing number of evaluations suggest that they have been successful in enabling people with learning disabilities to become more fully engaged in their communities (McNeish et al., 2016). An asset based approach to supporting parents with learning disabilities would include, among other things, support to access existing community resources, and parents’ inclusion in the design, development, and delivery of new community resources.

**Limitations**

It is important to acknowledge certain limitations in considering the findings of the review. Only studies that were peer reviewed and written in the English language were included. Research not published in academic journals and in other languages may still cast further light on the experiences of parents with learning disabilities. Another limitation lies in the complexity of applying inclusion and exclusion criteria in qualitative syntheses. Not all qualitative studies that were included had research questions that explicitly addressed ISNs, although the topic was judged to be prominent in their findings (Jones, 2004). While at least two research team members were involved in each decision during the search process, it is still possible that certain papers were excluded that might have provided useful evidence in answering the research question.

Despite these limitations, this study provides an important contribution as the first known systematic review to survey the qualitative and quantitative evidence regarding the role of ISNs in supporting parents with learning disabilities. While the quantitative synthesis provides preliminary evidence for the positive role of ISNs in promoting beneficial parent and child outcomes, the qualitative literature indicates a more complex conceptualisation of social support for parents with learning disabilities. Strategies to counter the social isolation of parents with learning disabilities must be designed with appropriate consideration of the social and environmental factors, including stigma about parenting and disability, that may affect the benefits that they and their children derive from ISN support.

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Table 1

*Summary of Studies Included in the Quantitative Synthesis*

| Study | Sample | Study design and analytic technique | Operationalisation of ISN | Outcomes measured in relation to ISN | Results relating to ISN |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Aunos et al. (2008) | 32 mothers with mild intellectual disabilities | Cross-sectional, correlation analysis  | Social network size and satisfaction with support  | Parenting style (positive parenting, hostile parenting, inconsistent/ineffective parenting); and quality of the home environment and mother-child interactions | No statistically significant relationship found between ISN and outcome measures |
| Ehlers-Flint (2002) | 20 mothers with mild to moderate cognitive disabilities | Cross-sectional, correlation analysis (mixed methods study) | Inventory of Social Contacts (perceptions of child-rearing, emotional, and material support from family, community, and therapeutic sources) | Parenting attitudes (parental enjoyment of child, appropriate expectations, parental nurturance, and appropriate discipline practices/beliefs) | No significant correlations between variables of interest |
| Feldman et al. (2002) | 30 mothers with intellectual disabilities, characterised as “mildly handicapped” | Cross-sectional, correlation analysis | Social support related to parenting: size of support network, satisfaction with support and need for support (Telleen Parenting Social Support Index; Telleen, 1995).Overall social support (Interpersonal Support Evaluation List; Cohen & Hoberman, 1983). | Parenting stress (total score, parent and child domains); positive interactions between mother and child recorded on observational checklist | Support satisfaction positively correlated with positive interaction and negatively correlated with parenting stress (total and parent domain); support need positively correlated with all parenting stress domains; overall social support negatively correlated with parenting stress (total and parent domain). |
| Feldman et al. (2012),  | 1,170 parents with cognitive impairment in a child protection sample | Analysis of data from the 2003 cycle of the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect; logistic regression analysis | Single item “few social supports” as assessed by investigating child welfare worker | Child functioning (emotional or behavioural issue, learning or developmental issue, physical disability or health issue);caregiver mental health issues | Low parental social support is a significant predictor of child emotional/ behavioural issues;parental mental health mediates the relationship between social support and child outcomes. |
| Lindberg et al. (2011) | 25 mothers with mild intellectual disabilities | Cross-sectional, correlation analysis | Social support (general support, family support, emotional support, and satisfaction with support) | Maternal sensitivity (based on observation of 20 minute semi-structured play session) | No statistically significant relationship between social support and maternal sensitivity |
| Meppelder et al. (2015) | 134 parents with mild intellectual disabilities | Cross-sectional, hierarchical linear regression, moderation analysis | Support network size | Parenting stress (parent and child domains); child behaviour problems  | Support network size significantly moderated the relationship between child behaviour problems and child-related parenting stress; parenting stress and child behavioural problems were positively related for parents with smaller networks  |
| Stenfert Kroese et al. (2002) | 15 mothers with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities | Cross sectional, correlation analysis (mixed methods study) | Informal social support: number of contacts, recency of contact and helpfulness of contact | Parental affect balance (subjective well-being and happiness), self-esteem, assertiveness | Number of contacts positively correlated with affect balance; recency positively correlated with self-esteem |
| Wade et al. (2011)  | 122 parents with intellectual disabilities | Analysis of baseline data for a parent education programme; structural equation modelling | Access to support (single item measuring how often support is needed but is unavailable) | Parent mental health; child well-being (developmental and behavioural-emotional); parenting practices (parenting warmth, parenting hostility, parent involvement, parent efficacy at childcare tasks) | Access to support had an indirect effect on child well-being, mediated by parenting practices. |
| Wade et al. (2015) | 122 parents with intellectual disabilities | Analysis of baseline data for a parent education programme; structural equation modelling | Access to support (single item measuring how often support is needed but is unavailable) | Parental mental health; child well-being (developmental and behavioural-emotional); parenting practices (parenting warmth, parenting hostility, parent involvement, parent efficacy at childcare tasks) | Access to social support has an indirect effect on child well-being, mediated by parental mental health and parenting practices.  |

Table 2

*Summary of Studies Included in the Qualitative Synthesis*

| Study | Study focus | Sample | Method and analytic technique | Relevant findings |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Collings et al. (2020) | How mothers with intellectual disability who experienced domestic abuse use peer support | 10 mothers  | Semi-structured interviews; inductive content analysis | Mutual support, understanding, and acceptance by peers with similar histories validated participants’ emotions, and provided companionship and comfort. Family networks were often fragile and could lead to various negative outcomes including reduced independence and removal of the child. |
| Ćwirynkało & Parchomiuk (2023) | Fathers with intellectual disabilities descriptions of support | 20 fathers | Semi-structured interviews; phenomenological analysis  | Support strongly influenced by gendered expectations of parenting. Negative experiences of disempowerment and disrespect by family networks were related to being excluded as a father and led to feelings of anger, loneliness and abandonment. Practical and affirmative support enabled and validated role as father. Participants perceived support as being mutual and placed emphasis on ‘repaying’ help when needed. |
| Durling et al. (2018) | How cultural values and practices impact the experiences of parents with intellectual disabilities within the UK Bangladeshi community | 4 parents, 4 family members, and 6 community members | Semi-structured interviews; thematic analysis | Parenting was viewed as an important social role and a communal activity in the Bangladeshi community. Parents with learning disabilities were restricted in their parenting tasks, reducing their ability to develop parenting skills. Some families purposefully sought out opportunities for parents to develop their parenting role/ skills. |
| Ehlers-Flint (2002) | The parenting perceptions and social supports of mothers with cognitive disabilities | 20 mothers  | Open ended questions included in structured interviews; thematic analysis | Participants felt their parenting abilities were judged and criticised by family members.  |
| Franklin et al (2022) | Experiences of stigma in the lives of parents with learning disabilities | 23 parents (17 mothers, 5 fathers) | Semi-structured interviews; thematic analysis | Positive family support perceived by parents as being beneficial for child protection outcomes. Peer support was also seen as valuable for modelling trusting relationships and with sharing experiences experienced as empowering. |
| Gur & Stein (2019) | Grandparent involvement in the family lives of children with intellectual disabilities | 21 social workers  | Semi-structured interviews; thematic analysis | Grandparents often lived near to or with their children and offered practical and emotional support. Some grandparents were excessively involved, which led to parents feeling excluded from their children’s lives. |
| Llewellyn (1995) | The views of parents with intellectual disabilities on their relationships and social support  | 6 couples  | Participant observation, in depth interviews over 2 years, grounded theory analysis | Supporters were more valued when they were accessible or nearby, trustworthy, and collaborative. Supporters were less valued when they were judgemental, inconsistent, ignoring parents’ wishes, conditional on supporters’ terms, and intrusive.  |
| Llewellyn et al. (1999) | The support networks of mothers with intellectual disabilities | 25 mothers  | Semi-structured interviews; grounded theory influenced analysis | Informal networks helped with childcare, skills, household management, and emotional/material support.  |
| Mayes et al. (2008) | How pregnant women with intellectual disabilities negotiate social networks  | 17 mothers  | Semi-structured interviews; phenomenological analysis | Networks are mainly used for hands-on care and material support. Women reported moving closer to supportive people who recognised their centrality as a parent and away from critical, intrusive, untrustworthy, or abusive relationships.  |
| More & Tarleton (2022) | The case for self-determined support for parents with learning difficulties | 6 mothers, 4 fathers | Semi-structured interviews and network maps; phenomenological analysis | Positive experiences of support networks related to close family ties and the giving of parenting advice, help with childcare and financial support. Negative experiences of support networks related to outdated advice, dealing with the care needs of ageing family members, and variable quality of relationships including violent or undermining behaviour.  |
| Rio-Poncela & Rojas-Pernia (2023) | The barriers faced by mothers with intellectual disabilities in being a parent | 13 mothers | Semi-structured interviews and focus groups; thematic analysis | Mothers felt unable to trust their friends and family to support them because their competence as parents was undermined. Women reported needing to continually prove they could care for their children adequately, causing emotional difficulties. At the same time, women described being dependent on their networks to retain family life. |
| Starke (2022) | Parents with intellectual disabilities experiences of support offered through social networks | 15 mothers, 6 fathers | Semi-structured interviews; thematic analysis | Typology of social networks related to bonding or bridging/linking social capital. Networks that included strong ties enabled access to a variety of support, which developed bonding social capital through meeting daily needs. Parents with a ‘mix’ in their networks talked about having different kinds of needs met, with advice and emotional support from close family and friends, and more instrumental support being accessed through weaker ties. Parents reflected on the importance of trust, interest and reliability in networks. Reciprocal relationships were also valued, based on loyalty and equality. Parents saw themselves and others in their support networks fulfilling obligations to each other. |
| Stefánsdóttir, Sigurjónsdóttir & Rice (2023) | The tools deployed by parents with learning disabilities to retain family life | Case study of 1 couple with data from multiple participants | Participant observation, archival and document analysis, interviews; grounded theory influenced analysis | Parents recognised the importance of their family network in helping them retain custody of their children, especially highlighting legal knowledge and practical support. The role of family in being trustworthy ‘co-parents’ was emphasised. |
| Stenfert Kroese et al. (2002) | The perspectives of mothers with intellectual disabilities on characteristics of their networks | 15 mothers  | Mixed methods, semi-structured interviews; thematic analysis | Supportive networks provided help with emergencies, childcare, material needs, household tasks, family activities, listening, and reciprocal support. Unhelpful network members were unavailable, inconsistent, and had limited capacity to help.  |
| Strnadova et al. (2019) | The experiences of parents with intellectual disabilities of social support with a focus on the role of peers | 26 parents  | Semi-structured interviews; inductive content analysis | Peer support groups were valued as places to find stress relief, guidance, and camaraderie, to learn skills, and to give mutual support. Preferred features of peer support were evident care and respect, shared experiences and/or identity, accessibility (either physically or virtually), and reciprocity. Generic parenting groups were experienced as exclusionary. |
| Traustadóttir & Sigurjónsdóttir (2008) | The role of extended family members in assisting mothers with intellectual disabilities to keep and raise their children | 18 mothersfrom 3 generations  | 2 consecutive 5 year studies using participant observation, individual interviews, and focus group; grounded theory influenced analysis | Most mothers had large family networks and received emotional and practical support. A key person (‘mother’) in the network was trusted by the parent and often served as an advocate with service providers. |
| Tucker & Johnson (1989) | The interpersonal aspects of social support for parents with intellectual disabilities | 12 couples, all mothers and some fathers (unspecified number) with intellectual disabilities | Participant observation and narrative fieldnotes; interviews coded for presence/ absence of situations/ behaviours of interest | Competence promoting supporters had time and resources to help parents, felt responsible for parents, were committed to enabling self-reliance, tolerant of shortcomings, and believed in parents’ abilities. Competence inhibiting supporters were disabled by other responsibilities and lack of resources, were unreliable, critical of parents, and focused on the child rather than building parents’ skills. |
| Wilson et al. (2013) | Postnatal care experiences of mothers with intellectual disabilities | 6 mothers  | Semi-structured interviews; phenomenological analysis | Emphasis was placed on practical and material assistance, although emotional support was also seen as important in the early days. Parent groups were perceived as helpful in confidence building and skills development. Parents relied on family even when unhappy with the support as they perceived no alternative. |
| Wos & Baczala (2021) | The everyday challenges of parenting for mothers with intellectual disabilities | 7 mothers | Photovoice; thematic analysis | Role of grandparents central in family life and as ‘co-parents’. Wider family network important for practical and problem-solving support. |

**Fig. 1**

*Identification of Studies*

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