



Title: *Letting Go – Dilemmas for Parents Whose Son or Daughter has a Mental Handicap*

Authors: Ann Richardson and Jane Ritchie

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This is a timely, well-written and relevant book which documents the experiences of parents struggling with the complexities of 'letting go' of their adult sons and daughters with an intellectual disability.

The authors conducted a two year study in England which involved discussion with over one hundred parents who had their intellectually disabled sons and daughters living with them. The level and range of disabilities was diverse and the age range was late teens to middle-age. The parents range from their forties to their eighties and reflect a broad range of socio-economic backgrounds.

The authors have sensitively drawn together the major themes to emerge from these interviews and the book is structured to reflect the progression from the family home to a residential alternative. The chapter headings are useful indicators of these stages: caring at home; perspectives on the move from home; the problem of independence; looking at the alternatives; planning and undergoing a move; and letting go – dilemmas and responses.

Professionals are generally accused of imposing their opinions on service users and the field of intellectual disability has an unfortunate history of judgemental advice and despair for the future of intellectually disabled children. Interviewees had salutary lessons for social workers in their reflections on negative experiences that have characterised their relationship with professionals.

In enquiring about short-term care, a couple had raised the question of longer term residential care with a social worker:

'She said, 'Oh, now, if anything happens

to you, we'll find a bed for her somewhere.' Well, it makes me feel I don't want to see any social workers again. If that's how they were – throw my child in and give her a bed somewhere – I don't want their help'. (p.22)

Another incident highlights the need for social workers to be familiar with services they refer parents to. One mother was unhappy about a hostel which a social worker suggested:

'Apparently there wasn't enough supervision and I said this to the social worker and she said, 'Well, do you know', she said, 'this is a very strange thing you should say about the house. Because I reverse my car in their driveway, but I've never been inside to see what its like'' (p.34)

As the authors note, parents may be unwilling to try a social worker's suggestions again for a long time. There were citations of support from social workers but these were the exception rather than the rule.

The honesty of the interviewees in discussing the difficulties and stressors of life with an intellectually disabled son or daughter gave the reader a degree of insight that is not easily available. Allowing the parents to speak without embellishing their raw experience makes the book a useful and accessible resource.

One of the most valuable insights is the extent to which parents feel a responsibility to care for their son or daughter – there is a strong sense of individual blame which permeates their comments:

'I think you've brought them into the world, they're your responsibility as long as you can cope.' (p.4)

'He's nothing to do with anyone else; he's my cross to bear' (p.24)

The issues which parents confront on making a decision about 'letting go' are clearly articulated. Firstly, they need to make a conscious attempt to enable their son or daughter to gain independence – this is done by relinquishing some of the control of parents, by providing opportunities for their son or daughter to establish meaningful relationships outside the family, and teaching them practical skills to manage the transition from the family home to independent living. Secondly, parents need to consider the alternatives and there are three features of residences that parents look for – a small number of people living together, a homely atmosphere and adequate staff and supervision.

'They must care – care about what they're doing.'

You've got to give them love, that's the main thing.'

Thirdly, are the preparations for the move which discusses the adjustment process for the family and the individual.

The introduction to the book makes explicit that it is a book about the experiences of parents and, as such, gives legitimacy to, and an important voice for, their views.

Given the current controversial issues and debates about community integration and deinstitutionalization of people with intellectual disabilities, this book provides human service workers and students with a constructive, balanced range of views to challenge the prevailing professional 'expert opinion'.

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