**Title:** Connecting: The experiences of fathers of children with neurodisabilities

**Authors:** Bogossian, Aline; Lach, Lucy; Nicholas, David; McNeill, Ted

**Objective(s)**

Parenting a child with a neurodisability can be a life altering experience. However, the paediatric neurodisability scholarship on parenting is often gender- neutral. Less is known about the unique parenting experiences of fathers of children and youth with neurodisabilities and the meanings that these experiences hold for them. The objective of this study was to explore the meaning of parenting among fathers of children with neurodisabilities.

**Method**

This study employed Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2009), a qualitative research approach, to develop an understanding of the parenting experiences of fathers of children with neurodisabilities. IPA allows for in-depth exploration of participants' unique worlds and acknowledges the researchers' role in co-constructing those experiences.

A purposive sample of eleven biological fathers (mean age 47.63; married n=10) of children and youth with neurodisabilities (mean age 12.36; girls: 36%) were recruited from two main sources: (1) a sub-sample of parents recruited from clinics and rehabilitation programs in Alberta, Ontario and Quebec for a national clinical study entitled Parenting Matters! (n=6); and (2) study advertisements and word-of-mouth referrals through individuals familiar with the study (n=5). The children presented with a range of neurodisability conditions (i.e. autism, cerebral palsy, and intellectual disabilities) as well as a range of functional impairments (i.e. difficulties in walking, talking, understanding and socialization).

Respecting the tenets of IPA, data collection consisted of one-two in-depth, semi-structured interviews (each 45-75 minutes in length) that were conducted at a time and place most convenient for study participants. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed for themes that reflected the fathers’ experiences of parenting their child. Interpretive analyses were developed around substantial verbatim excerpts of the interview data as well as descriptive and reflective field notes. The interpretive process was informed by the six-step IPA framework. Efforts were made throughout the research process to ensure methodological rigour (i.e.: reflexivity, sensitivity to context, grounding findings in participant narratives).

**Results**

Fathers’ narratives yielded striking and evocative stories. Fathers focused their parenting energy on understanding and forging emotional connections with their child, though this was, at times, a slow and frustrating process. In the absence of an emotional connection with their child, parenting was a difficult and solitary journey. Fathers expressed reticence to ask for emotional support. Fathers expressed a need for information to help them to understand and support their child. The social acceptance and future independence of the child was a primary focus for fathers. Over time, many fathers came to new understandings of themselves, their role and experienced pride and personal growth.

**Discussion/Conclusion**

The findings of this study revealed the importance making visible and understanding fathers' poorly understood parenting experiences. Practice implications of this study include the importance of noticing and reinforcing fathers’ emotional connection with their children, discussing parenting experiences with fathers, acknowledging fathers as resources in the family unit, and prioritizing fathers' information needs.