



# ESRI Research Bulletin

## *The Role of Disability and Parental Expectations in Child Wellbeing*

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This Bulletin summarises the findings from: Selina McCoy, Bertrand Maître, Dorothy Watson and Joanne Banks (2016), The role of parental expectations in understanding social and academic wellbeing among children with disabilities in Ireland, *European Journal of Special Needs Education*. Available online <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08856257.2016.1199607>

# *The Role of Disability and Parental Expectations in Child Wellbeing<sup>1</sup>*

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**\*Selina McCoy, Bertrand Maître, Dorothy Watson and Joanne Banks**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Research has shown that the expectations parents hold for their children are important to children's academic and socio-emotional development. Much of the research in this field has shown how socially disadvantaged parents or those from minority racial or ethnic groups hold lower expectations for their children, in terms of educational achievement or occupational attainment. There has been much less focus on the expectations parents hold for children with different types of disabilities and whether these expectations influence the development of these children, in part due to lack of data. This paper addresses that gap and goes on to ask whether the educational expectations mothers hold for their children at age 9 shape children's academic and social wellbeing at age 13.

## **THE DATA**

The paper is based on longitudinal data from the *Growing Up in Ireland (GUI)* study, a nationally representative study of children living in Ireland. In 2007/08, over 8,500 9-year old children were interviewed (wave 1) as well as their parents and teachers. They were re-interviewed (wave 2) in 2011/2012, when the children were aged 13. Drawing on information from teachers and parents, four main disability types were identified (general learning/intellectual, specific learning, emotional/behavioural and physical/visual/speech impairment), accounting for 21% of 9-year-old children. In wave 1, mothers were asked how far they expected their child to progress in education, with responses ranging from Junior Certificate, Leaving Certificate, through to third level degree or post-graduate degree. To examine socio-emotional development, the analysis focused on the Piers-Harris "self-concept" scale. This scale captures how children feel about themselves in areas like physical appearance, anxiety, behaviour, happiness and popularity. Academic development was assessed by looking at changes in children's performance on Drumcondra numeric ability tests at age 9

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and aptitude tests at age 13. The analysis also took account of a range of family characteristics, including family structure, mother's education, mother's age, economic vulnerability and the level of conflict and closeness in the parent-child relationship.

## **RESULTS**

The expectations parents hold were very important for young people, both those with and without disabilities. For young people with disabilities, parental expectations were lower than we would expect based on their performance in academic tests at age 9. Where the mother expected the young person not to progress beyond the Leaving Certificate, the young person had a poorer self concept compared to those where their mother's expectations were higher. Not only did lower expectations lead to poorer self-concept at 9, but also to a widening self-concept gap over time. Children with disabilities across all groups had poorer self-concept at age 9 compared to those with no disability. By age 13, the gap increased and young people with general learning/intellectual and emotional/behavioural disability fared less well, partly as a result of lower parental expectations. The academic development of these two groups also suffered as they moved from primary to second-level education. Mother's educational expectations again played an important role in children's academic development, particularly for understanding poorer academic development among children with general learning and emotional/behavioural disability. However, children with physical/visual/speech and specific learning disabilities did not differ from those without disabilities in terms of changes in their academic performance over time.

## **WHAT CAN BE DONE TO ADDRESS LOW EXPECTATIONS?**

The disability 'label' appears to have a range of negative implications, with lower expectations among mothers partly shaping poorer social and academic development for young people with general learning and emotional/behavioural disabilities. However, these expectations are likely to reflect what parents see in terms of the opportunities available to young people in further and higher education. One aspect of the solution, then, would be to promote greater school and post-school options for children with a disability. The second aspect of the solution would be to ensure that parents are informed of the opportunities that are available. Finally, children who experience difficulties in school also need other opportunities to excel and feel good about themselves so that their self-concept can be boosted by success in other, non-academic areas.

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