

IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO RAISE A CHILD

My Mum is not known for her left-wing political correctness, or a passionate sense of injustice, but both seem to have been fanned from some fading embers as she thrust an article torn from the Daily Mail into my hands and said "It's so cruel! Can't you write a letter or something?" Not liking to shatter her faith in the omnipotence of my letter-writing powers, I read the article quietly, folded it up and took it home to think about. It told the story of a couple described as having low IQs whose children were taken into care on the basis that their parents were 'Too Slow' to care for them.

The story left me feeling very disturbed. I thought first about me and my Mum fifty five years ago, when doctors told her that I had an incurable physical condition from which I would probably soon die. They told both my parents that nurses could care for me better than they could. They said I would be safer alone in a hospital cot than in their loving arms. The long-lasting harm done to me and my family by this separation has never been assessed, measured, recorded or recompensed. It is barely understood. There is a primordial bond between children and their birth parents which we break at our peril. Perhaps her still remembered pain was the fading ember fanned by the story.

Then there is the question of the level of scrutiny and judgement laid upon people with learning difficulties, based on a prejudice which is not applied to others. Competence is as much to do with self confidence as it is to do with levels of skill. When I took my driving test and sat next to the silent and inscrutable driving tester, complete with his clipboard, I can remember how my heart raced, my sense of myself as a good driver shrivelled, and the thought of three point turns and emergency stops seemed terrifying. Despite having driven for years, I could barely remember how to get the key into the ignition. Very few of us are at our best when called to prove ourselves to people who do not appear to believe in us. It seems to me that people with learning difficulties live almost entirely in a world of people who do not believe

in them and who, hypocritically, demand standards of them which many people without such labels would never achieve. I am never surprised when such victims finally explode, hit out and shout threats and abuse at people in authority who have the power to take from them everything they hold dear.

And parenting – whoever said it is a job for just one or two people, alone in a house with no support and a world waiting to judge us when it all goes pear-shaped? It is not the model of human existence which has sustained us for the thousands of years when it was recognised that it takes a whole village to raise a child. Because of today's economic pressures, most families now must be supplemented by services and paid or unpaid carers – extended schools and play-schemes, grandparents, child minders, au pairs and nannies - in order to manage. Working class families, as highlighted by the Daily Mail, who cannot afford to buy-in their support systems sometimes cannot cope in this climate. Forcibly removing children from such under-resourced families to be placed with better resourced families is punishing people for their inequality, and is not addressing the real problem.

The two things which can help families in need are money and support – real support based on respect and compassion. People with learning difficulties have been fighting for both of these things in the form of Direct Payments to buy-in practical assistance, and person-centred planning rather than service-led planning. This mobilises the natural relationships in the community to build circles of support and empowerment around vulnerable people. These principles are not yet practised in every local authority, but are recommended in the Government's 'Valuing People' strategy for people with learning difficulties. They seem to have been forgotten in this debate.

But maybe the bigger question is to do with the change in society which is making the raising of children harder and lonelier for everyone. Perhaps the struggles of this family to stay together is a timely reminder that parenting is a relationship, not a job, and that resources are best put to supporting that relationship rather than trying to replace it. I guess my Mum knew this.

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