

Marjorie Aunos ([00:06](#)):

We all know that parenting is hard, so how do parents with disabilities do it? With creativity and because we know of the value of interdependence! Come hear about ways experts say we can best empower these families and let's all learn about how parenting can be done differently.

I'm your host Marjorie Aunos. And today my guest is Robyn Powell. Robyn is a lawyer and Disability Advocate who speaks loudly about systemic and reproductive violence against women with Disabilities. Robyn is also a person with a disability herself. And prior to becoming a lawyer, she was a social worker, which gives her an interesting perspective on law issues. We started our conversation with Robyn introducing the first of 3 articles she authored, this one was on the topic of ableism.

Enjoy! And don't forget, for more information about where to find the full recording and additional resources, check out the show notes!

Robyn Powell ([01:25](#)):

My article on ableism really is trying to dig into why we have these pervasive inequities within the child welfare system affecting parents with disabilities. And I wanted to understand the ways that ableism really informed these inequities. For those who don't know, ableism is really just prejudice against people with disabilities, and ableism can exist like other types of oppression at various levels such as internalized, interpersonal, institutional, and structural. So in order to look at sort of what the effect of ableism was on the experiences of parents with disabilities involved with the child welfare system, we conducted interviews with 15 parents with disabilities who had been involved with the child welfare system previously, as well as 15 child welfare workers and 15 attorneys who represent disabled parents. And this study is part of a bigger project that again, used those three samples to really understand the experiences of parents with disabilities in the child welfare system.

And what we found really is that all three stakeholders, all really did agree that there was ableism within the child welfare system. And although they may have come to this at different ones is I think there was an overarching sort of agreement. And we found specifically four types of ableism. The first was internalized, and really this included sort of personal beliefs about people with disabilities among disabled parents as well as parent attorneys who represent parents and child welfare professionals. So it wasn't just the professionals that had sort of internalized ableism, but it was also the parents with disabilities themselves.

The second theme that was revealed in my analysis was interpersonal ableism. And this was interpersonal judgment and bias toward parents with disabilities by professionals who work with parents with disabilities in the child welfare system. The third was institutional ableism. And this we saw through discrimination against people with disabilities and the policies and practices of the child welfare system. And finally, we saw structural ableism, which was really, I think, the cumulative of ableism across the child welfare system in other institutions and its effects on parents with disabilities.

So we saw, as I said, sort of this really significant and pervasive ableism both, you know, through parents with disabilities, sort of recounting their own experiences, but also professionals really reflecting on their own, um, experiences working with disabled parents. And I think that this study really sort of provides another important lens for how we understand the experiences of disabled parents who are involved with the child welfare system.

Marjorie Aunos ([04:12](#)):

Yes. When I was reading through this one, it struck me and in the same time didn't surprise me. I

recently did the sort of inner analysis where I realized that I had internalized ableism and how it had impacted my life as a parent with a disability. So I totally like understood what the parents were sharing with you and how basically, I guess, society in a way reinforces that internalized ableism by sort of sending us messages and, you know, in some way having like microaggressions, where we're sort of like, it's reinforced those notions that as people with disabilities, we shouldn't or maybe we're not as good of a parents because we're not as, you know, productive or as involved in our children or, you know, the way that it's portrayed in society. So I really like that because it added sort of that layer, but also the fact that it was coming from these three different groups of people. That was definitely something that was awesome.

Robyn Powell ([05:23](#)):

Thank you. Yeah. And I know your study, I've been watching your work, so you've done some really impressive work on this issue. I think, you know, looking at all of these issues through sort of the lens of ableism is something that we really, I think need to focus on. So I'm glad to see this is getting attention.

Marjorie Aunos ([05:40](#)):

Yes, exactly. You also presented another article, and I would like to talk about this one next because I think it's sort of like, it follows a certain logic where you identified the ableism in the structure in the institution, even interpersonal as you mentioned or internalized. And then this one you sort of talk about a different framework that you would like child welfare to maybe sort of apply or use. So where does that framework come from and how do you think it could change or revolutionize child welfare?

Robyn Powell ([06:24](#)):

So, I wrote a paper really trying to theorize a framework for understanding the child welfare system inequities that parents with disabilities experience. And I did this because while there are other frameworks that look at inequities more broadly amongst child welfare system, particularly those related to race, there wasn't anything really specific to parents with disabilities from a cross disability approach. So I drew from two specific theories or frameworks to develop my framework. The first being the social model of disability and then the second being the African American disproportionality and disparity in child welfare framework. And collectively I found that while both of those frameworks were really helpful to a specific level, neither of them fully got at what I was trying to look at. And that is really understanding the whole broader picture of what are the factors that lead to child welfare system inequities?

And ultimately what I found was that I propose on my theory that there are really, I think, three main sort of levels of factors. And those are contextual, institutional, and individual levels. And I theorize that these three factors really impact the inequities that are experienced by people with disabilities within the child welfare system. I grouped them in my theory sort of from the broader to the most close. And so contextual level factors really looked at sort of state and federal laws and policies as well as societal answer the availability of formal services and supports. And then on the institutional level, I looked at factors in two separate categories. The first being agency systemic, and that really looked at institutional ableism, training for staff about disability, relationships between the child welfare system and the disability community, accessibility, and then parenting assessment. And then I also included human decision-making factors, specifically looking at bias, a lack of disability cultural competence and humility, and inconsistent decision making. And then on the individual level, I separated these again into two separate categories, the first being parent and family characteristics. And that would be things like disability type, sociodemographic characteristics, and social supports.

And then I looked at sort of how interactions with the child welfare system can also impact inequities. Specifically, I looked at prior involvement with the system and out of home placement. And collectively, I found that these factors can't interact with one another, and they can all cause child welfare system inequities. And these inequities I really identified as sort of the ones we mostly talk about that is sort of the overrepresentation of disabled parents within the child welfare system, the high rates of termination of parental rights among disabled parents within the child welfare system, the inadequate services and supports that are provided to disabled parents and their families, and finally the denial of services and supports, with respect to the child welfare system and parents with disabilities.

And my hope for this framework is really to one, inform really future research, sort of looking at what factors we should be considering when we're looking at inequities among disabled parents within the child welfare system. And two, to really inform policy making moving forward. That is sort of identifying where are the areas that policy makers could have the most impact? And I think that this framework can really help to inform, as I said, both research and policy making as well as I think practice.

Marjorie Aunos ([10:03](#)):

Right. It's interesting cuz I'm listening to you and it's sort of like you were trying to put decades of research and what we've known into something that could be used, and that could be used by a system that is not perfect. We, I think we all would agree, and to make it a better system. Am I right?

Robyn Powell ([10:26](#)):

I would say so. At some level, yes.

Marjorie Aunos ([10:30](#)):

Okay. And, and in a way it's sort of like guiding us in terms of what kind of trainings we could provide workers, what kind of research we should conduct in the future to find out the gaps that may be present, and maybe try to look at how we could modify the system to ensure that those inequities are no longer present.

Robyn Powell ([10:53](#)):

Yeah. And I think one of the things to understand that I really tried to put forward in the framework was also sort of my personal belief that **the best way to sort of confront the challenges or the ableism within the system is really to prevent disabled parents from being involved with the system.** And so some of the factors in the framework, I would say the vast majority actually are related to ensuring that disabled parents aren't even involved with the system. You know, I talk a lot about poverty for example. <Yes> That is, I would say one of the biggest factors leading to child welfare system involvement among parents with disabilities. And that is something that could be addressed through policy. And so that's just one of the examples. But I think to the extent possible, I'd like to really sort of make a focus on keeping disabled parents out of the system. Because I think, you know, even just involvement, even a referral, we see that there's substantial research that shows just the trauma that is inflicted on both parents as well as children just by having referral investigations. So I think, you know, the focus to the extent possible really should be providing the right resources and support outside of the system so that we don't even have to find parents within the system.

I really think sort of one of the issues is just the fact that most parents with disabilities live in poverty. They're really economically disadvantaged. And that is in large part because of our benefits programs in the United States at least that really trap people in poverty. When we look at why parents with disabilities are involved with the child welfare system, we see that the vast majority of the allegations relate to neglect. And when you look at what neglect is. It almost always relates to sort of a lack of

resources, which again is poverty and you know, poverty is simply the lack of economic sufficiency, et cetera. And that is something that could be addressed if we have sort of the will to do that.

And so I really remain strong in my belief that we need to sort of center the experiences of disabled parents and really focus largely on sort of creating a world in which we can keep them out of the child welfare system, while obviously also ensuring that we address the inequities of disabled parent experience within the child welfare system. But you know, in my dream world, we wouldn't have this substantial involvement because we would be providing families with the supports necessary that would sort of alleviate their involvement. I mean, even in my framework I talk about sort of mandated reporters and they are sort of an extension of the child welfare system, and they really lack awareness about parents with disabilities. So again, it's one of those areas that we could sort of confront.

Marjorie Aunos ([13:48](#)):

Now the third one, you talk about an abolitionist approach when you talk about, sort of achieving justice. So do you wanna talk about sort of the context of this one and how it might tie in with the first two articles that we talked about?

Robyn Powell ([14:04](#)):

Absolutely. My framework and my prior research really sort of reinforced this idea that the child welfare system is inherently designed to oppress disabled parents in other marginalized communities. And it's interesting because when I started writing this paper, it was really a much different paper. It was really trying to identify where all the areas that law and policy could be reformed to really challenge the, what I believe is sort of pervasive ableism within the child welfare system. And as I really dug into sort of my research, I remember sitting with my research assistant at the time who was a student and we had this conversation about sort of what we should do and how we should focus on with this paper. And I remember looking at him and we both sort of said it near the same time, essentially, I don't think the system is broken.

And we both were also surprised that we were saying that. But then we sort of, I remember looked into this and I said, you know, I think the system is doing much of what it was intended to do. The problem is if you look at the design of these system, it is intended to really oppress certain communities. You look at who's involved with the child welfare system, it is largely people who are economically disadvantaged, is people of color, and it's people with disabilities. And there is a reason that we do not see White upper-class individuals that are not disabled in the child welfare system. And it is purely because of the design of the child welfare system. So I started to really switch sort of approaches with this paper. And at the same time, we saw this really significant attention in the United States to abolition as a whole, particularly with respect to police killings of Black and Brown individuals.

And stemmed from that increased attention was a group of parents impacted by the child welfare system and other activists that were saying, you know, the child welfare system is an extension of sort of our more carceral logic that is sort of this idea that we police certain communities, we surveil them, we control them, and we punish them. And so that really started to really changed my frame of mind sort of on these issues. And it got me thinking to all of the work that I've done in the last 10 years, and how despite all of the work I've done in the last 10 years, not much has actually changed from an outcomes level, you know, and I've only been involved in 10 years. I think other people might see that they've been involved longer and sort of come to serve the same realizations.

And so that is disheartening, but it really did allow me to sort of reflect on why. And that really was where I came to this idea that the child welfare system, which I call the family policing system in the paper, is really an unjust social institution for disabled parents and their children. And the only way to overcome this unjust system is to entirely get rid of it, eradicate it, and instead we need to create a world in which

families have access to non-punitive supports and resources. That is they can receive the help they need without being surveilled and really policed.

I believe that reforms are not sufficient because the harms and injustices that are inflicted on these families are very designed. I draw on laws and policies as early as the 1800s that show that there was this distinction amongst parents with disabilities and not, and how they were to be treated. Where there was always sort of this pendulum that swung away from reunification and family preservation and towards separation and adoption. And so again, this whole system we see has been built upon this sort of ableist viewpoint. And I don't know that you can really undo that because that is the whole structure of the system, that is the whole foundation. So after really analyzing sort of why I believe this is the real problems and sort of the structural causes of our issues, particularly looking at sort of oppressive historical roots, again, sort of dating back through the history of the child welfare system, I look at how pervasive ableism really is at all levels. And then I look at the fact that in the United States, for example, we have significant legal protections in theory. And yet despite these protections, parents with disabilities continue to have their rights really violated. And so I look at the abolition movement more broadly, and sort of the focused abolition movement on looking at abolishing the child welfare system. And I also bring in disability justice, which is another way to look at the inequities experienced by disabled people. It takes a different approach than disability rights. And through these lenses I come away with sort of this agenda which I say is for achieving justice through abolition. And there were six specific things that I say need to occur. Um, and again, this is sort of this idea that instead of fixing a system that's not actually broken, it's doing what it's supposed to do, we need to move towards a world in which we don't need the system.

So first, I focus a lot on sort of the importance of centering disabled parents as leaders, particularly parents with disabilities who live at the intersection of disability and other marginalized identities, whether it's race, sexual identity, gender identity, et cetera. And really have them at the table as we're looking at how to create a world in which we can adequately support families, keep families safe, and really allow them to live their lives. The second thing is really this poverty issue that I've talked about a lot of times cause I strongly believe poverty is at the center of all of our problems. And then I think we need to invest in families. We need to end sort of how we surveil families, sort of through mandatory reporting. And then finally, we do need to implement sort of immediate protections because my dream or my goal rather is really going to take a long time. So there are specific things that I think we can do in the meantime, which would consider tear down the existing system while ensuring that parents with disabilities and others are protected.

Marjorie Aunos ([20:31](#)):

So a lot of work for a lot of, a lot of us for many years to come. What would you say to child welfare workers that are listening to us right now. Listening to you, sort of, you know, support and say, and present the fact that the system may not be broken, it's just we need a new system. What would you say to them in terms of their work, their value in the system, or what they should be sort of looking at, focusing on, or taking from all the research that you've done so far?

Robyn Powell ([21:07](#)):

You know, first I'd say I'm a former social worker, so I do still sort of really do identify sort of with that training and that professional experience. And my experience even through research is that most folks that work in the social work profession agree. They did not get into this field to act as police agents. They did not get into this field to be separating families, to be investigating families. They got into the field to support families. This is not what they got signed up for. And yet that is the position that so many workers find themselves in today.

So I think what I would encourage child welfare workers and others to think about is how can we support families without separating families, without inflicting further harm? And what are those supports going to look like? And then more broadly, I would just encourage child welfare workers to really be aware of their own biases. Everyone has biases in the world. And the important point is that we can really address them and in order to address them, we have to confront them. So something I always tell social workers and other mandatory reporters is whenever you have a situation, just stop for a minute and think, how would I respond if this parent did not have a disability? And I think that is a really good way to sort of check yourself, and see is this a sort of disability that is making me think that we should proceed one way or is this something more legit? And so I think that is a really good starting point, but again, I think the focus should be really on keeping families together because we know that families, particularly children, do so much better when they are in their homes. And we know that families where they're separated often when they become adults, the children try to find their parents again. <Yes.> So there's clear sort of attachments, and we should not be in the business of separating children when unnecessarily.

Marjorie Aunos ([23:02](#)):

It's interesting because as you were saying that comment about, you know, children turning 18 and then looking and searching for their families. I was just listening or re-listening to one of the interviews in this podcast where the conclusion was exactly that. That often what happens is that those children turn 18 and then, you know, they're searching for their roots. They're searching for who they look like. Who they feel like they're more connected and belonging to, because often what happens in the foster care system, even if you've had, you know, one family or a couple of families through your childhood, you don't necessarily feel like you bonded or you're connected to them in the same way. And so definitely having a system where we don't have sort of that disconnection for children is one that we would all benefit to get.

Robyn Powell ([23:59](#)):

Yeah, I think the interesting thing with the child welfare system, especially when it comes to parents with disabilities. In any other system in the United States for instance, we say you're innocent until proven guilty. But with the child welfare system you start with you're guilty until proven innocent. And that is just sort of indicative of I think of how we treat disabled families and other marginalized communities. And so having these tough conversations is really an important step.

Marjorie Aunos ([24:47](#)):

And what would you say to someone saying, or bringing up the fear that the children are not protected?

Robyn Powell ([24:35](#)):

So I would say A) we've had the system for decades and decades and we haven't seen that it's stopping people that are doing bad things. Um, we don't see that it's a system that actually works. And B) I would say that even in my paper I talk about research that is interviewing children that were abused by their biological parents and yet they still believe that the child welfare system needs to be abolished and they don't feel like they got justice even though they were separated and their parental rights were terminated, but they did not feel that there was any accountability actually. And also they did not think that was their way forward.

And you know, people say, well, aren't there times where a parent just can't take care of their kids? And yeah, of course, but we should look at community options, family members, really kinship. We should

try to keep families as connected as possible to their homes, to their families, to their communities. And that is really, I believe, the way forward. This is not to say that we should keep children in unsafe environments, certainly not. But it is sort of this recognition that communities, homes, families, those need to be prioritized.

Marjorie Aunos ([25:49](#)):

So with that said, I thank you so much for spending the time to talk about your research. To bring controversial solutions and elements to the whole conversation because I think it's with those different perspectives that we're able to thrive forward in understanding where we are and why we are here in the first place, to be then able to move forward into something that's much better, that works for all families. And for that I thank you, and I thank you for the advocacy that you do as well. And I look forward to all the great work that you continue to do.

Robyn Powell ([26:28](#)):

Thank you so much for having me. This has been great.

New Speaker (26:30):

This podcast was supported in part by a grant from the Minnesota Department of Human Services, Children and Family Services Division.