



## **A DIFFERENT KIND OF PARENT**

**Speech given at Joseph Rowntree Foundation Taskforce Conference  
'The Right Support' on 23 September 2003**

**By Reesha Armstead**

I have cerebral palsy. I work hard as a volunteer for Disabled Parents Network, I look after my own staff of personal assistants; I help my husband to run his business, I run my own home ... And, oh yes, I'm a mother! I have two wonderful daughters. I'm a parent. But I'm not just a parent, am I? I'm a disabled parent!

I say it like that because that seems to make me a different kind of parent. When I'm out with my girls, people don't expect that I'm their mother.

Had my non-disabled husband married a non-disabled woman and announced that his wife was expecting a baby, he'd have been congratulated, the families would have celebrated, he'd have been patted on the back! But he wasn't and they didn't and they couldn't. My husband married me because he chose to. When we told everyone about our baby, he wasn't congratulated, he was told off. No one celebrated, they just worried. We were grown adults, but we were treated like children.

We were so happy in ourselves, but no one else had ever talked about the possibility of me becoming a mother. It was different for my sister, our parents longed for her to produce grandchildren and when she did, everyone was happy for her.

I was frightened but no one comforted me. No one had faith in me to care for my baby. Most people saw it as a problem. But I grew strong. My determination to have a baby and confidence in myself overtook and the fear became everyone else's.

Imagine people coming up to you in the street and asking you how on earth you got pregnant and why you were ever allowed to have children.

Imagine being told by a midwife that she wants to give your baby a bottle because it's easier than enabling you to breastfeed.

Imagine, going to your doctor for a postnatal check six weeks after giving birth. Imagine the doctor saying: "what are we going to do with you now? We can't let this happen again can we?".

Imagine asking social services for help and being told by a child social worker that the best they can do is take your baby to a family centre for ten hours a day to be cared for away from you.

I say to people in the street that I got pregnant by having sex.

I told the midwife in the hospital that she couldn't give my baby a bottle and went on to breastfeed her for a whole year.

I told the doctor that he couldn't do anything with me and to cancel the appointment with the gynaecologist to discuss being sterilised because I wanted another baby.

I told the child social worker that I couldn't accept her offer and asked her never to darken my door again. I then fought adult services for a direct payment to enable me to employ my own personal assistants to enable me to be a wife and mother. Actually they refused and I asked for a reassessment of my needs without mentioning the care of the baby. In other words I actually had to deny my child. It worked.

I now know that I was born to be a mother. People say it to me all the time. It seems I have proved myself. Ria is now seven and Lenna is almost eighteen months old. I'd like to say that things were different when I had Lenna and to some extent they were. It was certainly easier because the support I have is now very well established and most of what worked for Ria also worked for Lenna. But I still received some of the same negative attitudes.

It is the fact that I have had to prove myself that makes me a disabled parent. When will I just be able to be a Mum? Do you know?

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