

A photograph of a woman with long, wavy brown hair and glasses, holding a baby. They are both looking at each other and smiling. The lighting is warm and golden, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The woman is wearing a yellow top. The baby is wearing a grey long-sleeved shirt.

# DAUGHTERS OF FORTUNE: THE EXHIBITION

Stories of learning disability and parenthood  
from across the North of England

## Mind the Gap is proud to present **DAUGHTERS OF FORTUNE**

A ground-breaking project exploring learning disability and parenthood through arts and science.

Mind the Gap has been documenting real life stories from parents with learning disabilities across the UK since 2015.

The parents in this book wish to share their experiences and open up conversations that challenge the stigma surrounding learning disability and parenthood.

This collection shares stories of people from the North of England.

With thanks to Geordie Mums, The Lawnmowers, Bradford People First and CHANGE.

Commissioned by Great Exhibition of the North.



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**ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND**

These stories are extracts from interviews with parents with learning disabilities; sometimes joyful, sometimes harrowing. They contain references to: parenthood, disability, love, loss of a child, physical and sexual abuse, partnership, trauma, life. Some readers may find some of the content upsetting.

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A Mind the Gap project  
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Research & Words: Mary Cooper and Daniel Foulds  
With thanks to parents across the North of England who shared their stories

**Age guidance: 14+**





## I've never walked away

I had an easy pregnancy; it was just the back ache. The midwife knew I went to special school. They came to the house, I was assessed and I was doing everything right. He was premature and he was about eighteen months or two years behind. I never ever neglected him. He was always clean. I took him for all his injections. When he was two I took him to the paediatrician who said he had learning difficulties.

All the problems started when he was three. He used to bang his head and hoy things a lot. He used to bite and when he got to five or six it was scratching. I used to do the Lego with him, play shops, bubbles, painting, play dough, jigsaws. I got the paddling pool out. When he got older, I got the fences in the back garden built six foot 'cause he would try and climb over. I liked to take him out, but we had to take him to quiet places. We took him to the coast and Hexham Park and he was watched all the time.

I had a lot of help from my Mam. They wanted to take him away at six, but my Mam says, 'No'. Then he burnt my house down. The fire officer said, there should have been somebody there, but my mam was too ill; she only lived eight months after. I was upset at first when he was fostered but his foster mam only lived three bus stops away. She was very good.

He's in supported living now. We go out once a fortnight. We go to Wetherspoons. We go to Bowls. We go to the shows. I've never walked away from him. I've been there all the time.





## Geordie Mums and me

Things were very, very bad when I first came to Geordie Mums. I want to say thank you to Donna and Joanna and everyone because they've done so much for me. If I tell you what to say will you write it all down and make a poem?

If it wasn't for you,  
I'd still be the nervous one,  
The shy one, the quiet one,  
Isolated, ashamed,  
Almost a shadow,  
If it wasn't for you.

If it wasn't for you  
I would never reach out,  
Never touch, never speak,  
Never laugh, never trust,  
Never dare to hope,  
If it wasn't for you.

But now, because of you,  
Your respect, your kindness,  
And little by little, and taking my time,  
I've given up whispering, given up hiding,  
I've found my voice,  
Now I say what I mean.

And, because of you,  
This is what I want to say.  
Now I can touch, now I can speak,  
Now I can laugh, now I can trust,  
Now I can dare, now I can hope.  
Now I can open my heart  
And say thank you.

Thank you, Joanna.  
Thank you, Donna.  
Thank you, Geordie Mums.

With love from Diane. - 2.5.18



## Just being there

**I went to the doctors thinking I wasn't well and he told me I was pregnant. I was shocked because I wanted to wait until I was older. I was 23 and I was working at the swimming pool. When I told Dan he was concerned because we didn't have our own place to live.**

I finished work and looked after the baby. My mum and my family helped me a lot. Tom was diagnosed with a learning disability at 3. I was happy but a bit sad because I wanted him to have a normal life and I know it's not like that with a learning disability.

Tom's brother Lewis was born when I was 25. He's 17 now and lives with me. We've got a nice place of our own. I was pleased to be pregnant the second time. We planned the pregnancy. Lewis was also diagnosed with a learning disability. When they were both diagnosed with a learning disability Dan didn't want to know. He left. It took a long time to get any help with Tom. He's 20 now. He's in a home where he's looked after and he's happier and safer and he can't run off and he can't hurt anybody. I still go and see him.

The best thing about being a parent is spending time together; going for walks, going to the park, going to the pictures, going on holiday to Blackpool.

I would say to anyone thinking about having children, it's hard work but the most important thing is just being there, spending quality time with your kids, and loving them and taking care of them.

Don't listen to people when they say you can't do things because you've got a learning disability. You can do lots of things, including being a good mum.





## I wanted to live my life

**At school no one talked to me about my body changing or about sex. They thought learning disabled people didn't have sex.**

It was my mum and dad that taught me what was right and wrong; how to treat your partner and to give them respect. I didn't want to rush into settling down and having kids, I wanted to live my life first; I wanted to go out, go out with my friends, go out into the world. I had full-time jobs, part-time jobs; I did catering and cooking. I wanted to live my life.

I got into a relationship with Lisa and we were together for two years. We sat down and we talked about having children. At the time, no, I didn't want children. I wanted to settle down, get to know her. She had a learning disability too. At first it was going well but the days and months went by she was pushing me so much to have kids. I wanted to wait. She wanted kids. Then we split up.

Not long after she came looking for me to let me know she was pregnant. I was a bit shocked at first.

When the baby was born I was over the moon. I'm happy now because I spend a bit of time with him. I like to walk him around and take him out and play with him. Sometimes I go over and I put him to bed.

On Fathers' Day she sent me a framed photo of him saying 'Best Dad in the World'. It's in my bedroom on the top of my snake tank and when I wake up I can see him. Lisa has a lot of support from her Mum and her Dad; they're there for her day and night. There wasn't a social worker involved at all.





## I went back to an empty house

When I left home and moved to Newcastle my mum and my sister said they would give me a week and I'd be back but I proved them wrong.

I did catering for a year and a half, trained to be a chef, until I had my children. I got married when I was 22. He was okay when I first met him. At the time I loved him. I hoped we would be together for a long time. I was married for a year. He used to control us and beat us up.

When we went to court, Social Services talked to the other professionals that were involved with the children rather than talking to me. When they did speak to me they talked down to us, like a two-year-old. They wouldn't listen to me. I had to decide to put them into fostering. They said it was only temporary, but it ended up having a child protection order on all three of them.

After the court I went back to an empty house on my own, with all the children's things around me, a three-bedroom house. It was really hard.

It's helped a lot coming to Geordie Mums. I decided to go back to college. I did Entry Level One, Two and Three in Maths and English. That's the equivalent of a GCSE. My teachers told me I couldn't do that, but I did and I'm proud. They said I wouldn't have a job, but I do. I'm paid by Skills for People to work for them. We train student social workers and student midwives telling them our story and I do the PowerPoint myself now. And it's really interesting and it's really valuable.

My son's home now 'cause I got him back when he was turning 17. I would love all my kids home, but I know I can't have that.





## Nobody would hear you

**We got married - but, it was a forced marriage because at that time the church didn't believe in sex before marriage, so I had to get married because we had sex.**

It was the church decided. I thought, that was it, the only option. When he started beating us and stuff I didn't talk to anyone about it; I kept it all inside. I didn't say anything. I've done a lot of that. Yeah, I've spent a long time keeping quiet.

I'd been abused when I was a child. He turned it against me. It was horrible. Because nobody would hear you. Nobody cared. Nobody was bothered. Nobody would speak on my behalf. I lost three children. To me it was like a death but they was still there. I was grieving for years. Because I could hear them crying - and they weren't there. I mean when Callum was taken off us his Christmas presents were still in his room.

And life's better now because I can get out, go to Lawnmowers, do things. I'm a DJ as well and a drummer. I play in the glass orchestra. I write my own songs. And I write poems. My current husband, Alan. He's lovely, really lovely. And he's mine! I met him when we were both volunteering. Well I just asked him to go out with us. I thought he was very well mannered. Nicely spoken. He's got three kids; we'd got that in common. I'd never really trusted anybody before - but I trust Alan.





## Just look at her now

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When I was young I always wanted children, but the biggest problem for me was finding someone who would want me for me. I fell in love with my husband at first sight, which sounds very cheesy but is absolutely true! By then I'd already stopped looking for 'the package'; I took a leaf out of the Bible and looked with my heart not my eyes, and I saw him, and fell in love with him. I noticed something that other people hadn't seen. When I told him I'd always wanted kids he was like, 'well, we've not even been together that long yet'.

When we were chatting with the advocates about starting a family the statistics they told us were quite scary; something like one in ten Aspergers people were allowed to keep their baby. I was determined we'd be the one in ten! When I found out I was pregnant I was over the moon and he was like, 'f-word, I didn't actually think we'd get pregnant that quick!'. When my Mum came round and I told her, she got up off our couch and gave me a massive hug. She did say she wasn't going to be a doting grandma but she's gone back on that!

She was very prem; she looked liked a skinned rabbit, in my husband's words. I wasn't allowed to hold her because she was so early and she was very ill in hospital for a long time.

We were very strong as a couple during all this. The first three months after she came home she had feeding tubes so we had to be her nurses as well. The main thing is, she's doing so well. You wouldn't think she'd had all that trouble. Just look at her now!





## It did feel different

### Her story

I was never very keen on school 'cause I was bullied. I just liked going out on my mountain bike and going for walks.

I didn't bother with boys back then, not at school. I didn't think about getting married and having children.

I had relationships later; I don't want to talk about that. It did feel different with Ted; it was more loving. I trusted him completely, I still do. I feel safe with Ted. He feeds us well an' all. He's a brilliant cook. We did get married, and I ended up falling pregnant. Aye.

### His story

My problems started when I was about 13 – I started hearing these voices. I had schizophrenia which wasn't diagnosed at the time. My father used to abuse me and I couldn't keep myself up to scratch with the world so I went to a squat with a load of lads and we took LSD; I could forget about the voices. Drugs was a problem 'cause my schizophrenia was really bad. Then I thought, 'Sod this, I'm not going to commit crime anymore; I'll get us a life; I'll settle myself.' It took me years. I ended up with voluntary work – but I was trusted. We met at Time Exchange. She's a hell of a lass, man. I love her very much.

### Their story

We ended up with a meeting at the hospital; Social Services and the foster parents. It had all been set up without us knowing and she had to actually hand the baby over to them.

We didn't get a chance to take the bairn home. I was in tears. I can't understand why they had to do it. I think it was because I've got learning difficulties, and the problems that you've got as well.





## All I ever wanted in my whole life

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**It's really hard to talk about my family. I loved my Mum and my brothers and sisters; it was my Dad. I just felt I didn't belong anywhere.**

All I ever wanted in my whole life was a child to love. Of my own. I wanted to bring a child into the world and do everything different. And protect the child from the life that I'd had. I was just so happy to be pregnant. And I ended up having two children.

Matthew's whole life of going through school, I went with him, from when he was five until he was 18. I went every day. I worked with him. I learnt more there than I've ever learnt in my life. There was one teacher, June; she helped me to believe in myself. She said that I could do it and I did do it. I got taught in a way that felt safe, not like the school I'd been to. I couldn't read and write until then. June was a very special lady, very loving. I loved her and she taught me such a lot.

We all love singing and dancing; we do our acting together, we sing together. And I write songs. We have a lot of fun. We got involved with pantomimes through a social worker. Matthew got a main part straight away 'cause he's very clever and he can remember all his words and he can sing and he can dance, even though he's a big man.

And after that Kirsty was Cinderella, she got Sleeping Beauty; she's played a few main parts. She's loved every minute of it. So there's a lot of good stuff you can get through social workers too.



## Geordie Mums

Being a mum can be tough at times. Skills for People's Geordie Mums group means mothers with learning disabilities can get together, have fun and support each other.

Our group has come a long way: we work with health and social services, to make sure all mums get the support they deserve. We are one of the few groups for mothers with learning disabilities, and we know our work is important.

Even so, it can be hard to get the funding we need to survive. Please support Geordie Mums; we need your help to make things better for local mums with learning disabilities.

 [GeordieMums](#)



Skills for People is a Charity which works with disabled people and their families in order to improve their lives, communities and services that affect them.

[skillsforpeople.org.uk](http://skillsforpeople.org.uk)

All proceeds from the sale of this booklet will be donated to Geordie Mums.







## The Research

Mind the Gap has been working alongside Dr Kate Theodore from Royal Holloway University of London to capture and analyse a series of new interviews with parents with learning disabilities.

The first phase of the research was published in September 2017, and included stories from 5 mothers and 3 fathers, from the Leeds and London areas.

Although each of their stories is different, there are some things that are similar. The researcher looked at these themes (similar ideas) in the different stories. This type of research is called 'Thematic Analysis'.

The 8 parents had 22 children altogether. Some had children as young as 2 years old, and others had children that had grown up and were adults.

7 out of the 8 parents had had their parenting skills assessed by children's services.

6 out of 8 had been separated from some or all of their children, either for some time or forever.





## Stories of strength and hope

People talked about very difficult experiences in their journey as parents. But parents also talked about staying strong, trying to cope with these difficulties, and staying hopeful for the future.

Parents wanted professionals and others in the community to stop judging them as not being good enough because they have learning disabilities. Parents wanted other people to believe that, with support, people with learning disabilities can be good parents.

To find out more, and obtain a full copy of the research, you can download from [mind-the-gap.org.uk/projects/Paige](https://mind-the-gap.org.uk/projects/Paige) or call Mind the Gap on 01274 487390.







## **Bold, cutting edge, world class theatre since 1988**

Mind the Gap is one of Europe's leading learning disability theatre companies that creates work for UK and international audiences.

Based in Bradford, West Yorkshire for 30 years, the company works in partnership with learning-disabled artists to deliver a bold, cutting-edge and world-class artistic programme that impacts locally, nationally and internationally. Work that excites, surprises and challenges audiences.

Daughters of Fortune: The Exhibition is the first book of stories of learning disability and parenthood.

[mind-the-gap.org.uk](http://mind-the-gap.org.uk)

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