

Au·ton·o·my: The Reproductive Rights of People with Disabilities
By: Elaine Morgan

I am a person. I am assuming that, because you are reading this essay, you are most likely also a person. Persons, like you and me and the other 8 billion of us, often value our ability to choose, to make decisions. I am choosing to write this essay, you are choosing to read it, and this morning I chose to drink an energy drink (which I am now regretting). We have this ability to choose, and it gives us autonomy. Yet there are so many people in our world today who are lacking in autonomy in one way or another, and a particular group of people is facing a particular problem that has long been overlooked: people with disabilities are being forcibly sterilized, often without their consent or knowledge. The choice to have a child is no longer theirs, and a piece of their autonomy has been stolen. People with disabilities should be entitled to reproductive rights just as everyone else should be, and the issue of compulsory sterilization should no longer be overlooked.

A research report performed and written by the National Women's Law Center states that, in the U.S., thirty-one states still permit forced sterilization, and in seventeen of these states, forced sterilization is also allowed with children. Only two states, North Carolina and Alaska, have banned the usage of forced sterilization. States that allow forced sterilization can take away a person's ability to reproduce without informing them of their decision or without allowing them to have a say. Often, a parent or guardian will recommend sterilization for a certain person with a disability in court. In select states where forced sterilization is allowed, the person may not even have a guardian to recommend the sterilization in court; people can just request that the court mandate a person with a disability to be sterilized. Aside from hysterectomies, one specific way to sterilize is by the "Ashley treatment." The "Ashley treatment" name is derived from a six-year-old child named Ashley with a disability, whose parents did not want her to reproduce, so they asked the doctors to both perform a hysterectomy and to give her drugs and an operation to ensure she looked like a child forever (National Women's Law Center, 2022).

Forced sterilization has long been attributed to the eugenics movement, which originated in the late 1800s and early 1900s. As a concept that "better breeding" should be encouraged, eugenics influenced a movement that undesirable people, such as those with lesser IQs, differing mental abilities, or people of color, should not be allowed to reproduce. Early eugenics laws allowed for over seventy-thousand individuals of color or individuals with disabilities to be forcibly sterilized in the 1900s. Unfortunately, some of these ideas still linger today, especially the idea that people with intellectual or physical disabilities are somehow unfavorable (National Women's Law Center, 2022). However, over a hundred years later, it is time for us as people to realize that someone's mental or physical ability should not dictate how much reproductive autonomy a person has. Someone's IQ or disability is not a measure of a person in and of itself, and a person with a disability, no matter what kind, is still a person who deserves a choice.

Many people may choose to argue the idea that forced sterilization should not continue. Additionally, perhaps they believe that forced sterilization is extreme, but they may still feel that people with physical or intellectual disabilities are not fit to be parents, and any children they have should be removed from their care. It is true that parents with disabilities, particularly intellectual, may not be aware of all the parental responsibilities they must carry out, and this can lead to parental neglect. However, parenthood for people with learning or intellectual disabilities often leads to satisfaction, pride, and higher self-esteem; thus, it may not be a lack of love or care that leads to this neglect, but rather a lack of support. Appropriate and positive support for parents with intellectual disabilities may allow them the ability to have their children and take care of them, too (Baum, n.d.). While parental support is still lacking in many ways in the U.S., and while much research is still to be done into how these parents can be supported, we are on the right track to assisting people with intellectual disabilities to love and care for children of their own.

I am a person; however, it is true that I do not have a physical or intellectual disability. I cannot identify with the issues that these individuals face, nor can I fully understand. I am a person who is able to have her own children if I so please, and to a certain extent, I am also allowed to choose to not have children. Yet I had no idea that so many people can be forcibly sterilized without their consent or knowledge, especially those with disabilities, and I feel it is a subject that is not spoken about, that is often overlooked. Reproductive rights are human rights. No person should be deemed unfavorable or undesirable based on their ability, and every person should be allowed the right to have a child. Every person should be allowed the choice to have a child, and people with disabilities should be able to regain this missing piece of their autonomy.

References

Baum, S. n.d. Parents with intellectual disabilities. *Intellectual Disability and Health*.

<http://www.intellectualdisability.info/family/articles/parents-with-intellectual-disabilities>

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