



The association between children's contact with disabled people and their attitudes towards disability

This research summary was written by PenCRU and members of the PenCRU Family Faculty

Key findings

- We looked for and examined all studies that have measured children's contact with disabled people and their attitudes towards disability.
- 35 studies were included in the review, dating from 1966 to 2011.
- 22 of the studies in the review found that children who had more contact with disabled people had attitudes towards disability that are more positive.
- 11 studies found children's contact was not associated with their attitudes towards disability.
- 2 studies found children's contact with disabled people was associated with attitudes towards disability that are more negative.
- Contact was measured either by children self-reporting (actual questions varied across studies) or by categorising children based on their school policy of segregation or inclusion.
- The reporting of the studies was generally poor, and further research of better quality is needed.
- Overall, the results are mixed but are strongly suggestive that children's contact with disabled people is often associated with having attitudes towards disability that are more positive.

Who did the study and why?

This review is part of a larger project on promoting positive attitudes towards disability. Megan MacMillan, a PhD student at Peninsula Cerebra Research Unit (PenCRU), which is a childhood disability research unit at the University of Exeter Medical School, leads the project.

The research was supported by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Collaboration for Leadership in Applied Health Research and

Care (CLAHRC) for the South West Peninsula – known as PenCLAHRC.

The idea for the project originated from members of the PenCRU Family Faculty who stated negative attitudes towards disability were a major barrier in their children's lives. The aim of the review was to examine the evidence of whether children's contact with disabled people is associated with attitudes towards disability that are attitudes that are more positive.

Background

- Contact between members from different social groups (e.g., different races) has shown to improve attitudes towards each other.
- A review had not been conducted that explored 'contact' in the context of children and their attitudes towards disability.
- If contact is associated with children's attitudes towards disabled people, then increasing contact could be an important aspect of interventions aimed at improving attitudes towards disability.

What did we do?

- This type of research is called a systematic review. Systematic reviews bring together the results of all studies addressing a particular research question. They provide a comprehensive and impartial summary of research evidence.

Searching for evidence

- We searched online libraries for all the research papers that examine associations between children's contact with disabled people and their attitudes towards disability.
- Over 5,000 references were looked at and the ones that did not meet the selection criteria created for this review were filtered out.
- The reference lists of the final set of studies were also searched for relevant studies.

Bringing the evidence together

- For each study we searched for information regarding the number of participants, age of participants, date of the study, whether they found contact was associated with children's attitudes and whether this was a small, moderate or large effect.
- We then brought together or 'synthesised' the results from the studies. This enabled us to consider to what extent evidence from research can answer the question 'Is children's contact with disabled people associated with more attitudes towards disability that are more positive?'

What did we find?

Main findings

- 35 studies were included in the review.
- 22 studies found that children with more contact with disabled people had better attitudes towards disability.
- 11 studies found contact was not associated with attitudes.
- 2 studies found that the contact children had with disabled people was associated with negative attitudes; however, the frequency of contact was poorly defined, but appeared minimal in these studies.
- The number of participants in each of the studies ranged from 60 to 5,837 children.
- Studies were published between 1966 and 2011.

Measures of contact and attitudes

- Contact was measured in two ways, either:
 - a) Self-reported, which included questions regarding contact through disabled friends, family members and classmates, or
 - b) By the school the children attended i.e., inclusive or segregated.
- Attitudes were measured in 26 different ways. Some examples include:
 - Standardised questionnaires
 - Short description of a disabled child followed by questions about how they would respond to that child
 - 'Peer nomination', in which participants rank or pick the children in their class or school they would most like to interact with.
- Differences in the way attitudes were measured make it impossible to bring the results together.

Quality of the methods and reporting

- Many studies failed to report adequate details about their methods and results. This makes it difficult to determine if rigorous methods were used and to be confident about the findings.

- The quality of the studies varied, with the older studies reporting poorer methods (e.g., inappropriate data analyses).

Who reviewed our research to make sure it was conducted well?

- The systematic review is published in a journal called Developmental Medicine and Childhood Neurology.
- Before the journal accepted the review to be published it asked two independent experts to look at the paper and decide whether it had been properly conducted and whether it was important enough to publish.

What's next?

This review shows a need to explore the relationship between children's contact with disabled people and their attitudes towards disability with methods that are more rigorous.

In particular, we thought the following issues should be researched more thoroughly:

- Are the measures of contact and attitudes appropriate? Are they an accurate reflection of children's contact and attitudes?
- How might contact influence attitudes? E.g., does it change children's understanding, empathy or anxiety about engaging with a disabled person?
- What type of contact is associated with attitudes that are more positive? Does the contact have to be positive?
- The studies we looked at reported 'associations' between contact and attitudes measured at one point in time. To examine whether increasing contact will actually improve attitudes they would need to be studied over a period of time.

If you would like to read the full version of the systematic review, please contact Megan

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- The team that carried out the systematic review are Megan MacMillan (PhD researcher for PenCRU), Chris Morris (Senior Research Fellow in Child Health), Mark Tarrant (Senior Lecturer in Social Psychology) and Charles Abraham (Professor of Behaviour Change).
- The research team are all part of the Peninsula Cerebra Research Unit and/or the NIHR Collaboration for Leadership in Applied Health Research and Care of the South West Peninsula (PenCLAHRC) at the University of Exeter Medical School.
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