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## ATTITUDES OF NORMAL CHILDREN TOWARDS PEERS WITH MILD INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY IN AN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION SETTING IN TRICHY DISTRICT

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### ABSTRACT:

Intellectual disability is one of the common congenital disorders associated with social stigma. Children with mild intellectual disability are attending inclusive schools, but evidence suggests that these children are more prone to peer rejection and other problems when compared with their non-disabled. Community attitudes and knowledge of this condition are important for inclusion of people with mild intellectual disability into the community and improving their quality of lives. Results from surveys from the world showed that people still hold negative attitudes towards inclusion of children with mild intellectual disability. Negative attitudes constitute the major barriers to the development of their potential. This study aimed to describe the attitudes of normal children towards their peers with mild intellectual disability, and assess the gender role and interpersonal contact play in shaping these attitudes. A cross-sectional study involving 400 normal children was carried out in inclusive schools located in Tiruchirappalli District. A semi-structured questionnaire containing items on the "Chedoke-McMaster Attitudes towards Children with Handicaps (CATCH) scale", which elicits responses on a Likert scale numbered 0 to 4 were administered. Data analysis was done using Stata version 12. Descriptive analysis, association between variables was carried out. The attitudes of children in the school were generally positive ( $M=60.48$ ,  $SD=10.157$ ). Having a friend/relative with a disability was associated with more positive attitudes among female and male students. In inclusive setting, attitudes of normal children towards their peers with mild intellectual disability were generally positive. Since interpersonal contact was associated with positive attitudes towards children with mild intellectual disability, interventions should be directed towards promoting interpersonal relationships in order to build an integrated society.



**KEYWORDS:** Children Mild Intellectual Disability, Normal Children, Attitudes, Inclusive Education, Interpersonal Relationships.

### INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, an estimated 650 million people live with disability and about a quarter of them are younger than 18 years

(World Health Organisation, 2011). Children and adolescents with disabilities face inequalities in healthcare, transport, education, employment and

other aspects of human endeavour. About 85% of them live in developing countries where they often suffer neglect, stigma and discrimination

(United Nations Children's Fund, 2005).

While inclusive education has been proposed as a means of promoting integration among children with disabilities and their peers, its implementation is still a matter of debate in many African countries (Garuba, 2003; Ajuwon, 2008). Improved societal attitudes towards people with disability are necessary to create an environment for integration, but studies have shown that negative attitudes towards young people with disabilities are a major barrier to inclusive education (Christensen, 1996; Rousso, 2003). Okunrotifa (1988).

While it is vital to understand attitudes for policy formulation and implementation of inclusive education and social integration of people with disabilities to succeed. This study therefore aims to describe the attitudes of normal children towards their children with mild intellectual disability, and to assess the role of interpersonal contact in their acceptance of these peers.

## METHOD

The study was conducted in inclusive schools of Trichy district. The study was a cross-sectional survey of normal students' attitudes towards children with mild intellectual disability. 400 respondents were selected from a group of normal students.

As per the objective laid down for the study, the CATCH Scale was administered to the non disabled peers. The only revision recommended was to translate the test in the local language. It is stated that the items in the test instruments are found applicable to the research subjects in any region of India or elsewhere. Initially the non disabled peers were chosen by simple random sampling and establish rapport with them. Then the purpose of collecting the data was explained to them and it was emphasized that the confidentiality will be maintained. The respondents ensured that all the items would be answered without any hesitation and fear.

A semi-structured self-administered questionnaire was used to collect information about the participants, such as their socio-demographic characteristics and whether they had a close friend/relative with a disability.

The second part of the questionnaire included items assessing attitudes towards people with disabilities. The "Chedoke-McMaster Attitudes towards Children with Handicaps (CATCH) scale" was used to measure attitudes. This scale was developed by Rosenbaum et al (1988) and was used in a similar study by Beck et al (2000). It has a high validity and reliability. It is one of the most complete instruments as it measures all the three components of attitudes: affect behaviour and cognition (Feldman, 1993 & Tirosh E, 1997).

The CATCH scale is a self-administered questionnaire which elicits response on a Likert scale and consists of twelve items each on affect, behaviour and cognition.

Data collection took place in the classrooms. Questionnaires were distributed to the students with the assistance of the class teachers, and it took 20 -25 minutes to fill them. The mean score of items on cognition, affect and behaviour were calculated for each participant. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the scale was 0.83 in this study.

Responses to items on the CATCH scale were classified into three categories: agree, neutral, and disagree. Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents and attitudes of normal children towards their peers with mild intellectual disability were indicated using descriptive statistics.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

400 normal children completed the questionnaire. The respondents were between the ages of 11 to 14 years. Majority of the respondents (68.75%) were in the age group of 13-14 years. Equal number of respondents 50% male and 50% female were selected from urban and rural area. With regard to educational level, majority 65.75% were studying in VIII standard, 19.75 % were in VII standard and 14.5% were in VI standard. Considering the respondents having disabled friends 56.25% were having disabled friends and 43.75% did not have disabled friends. With regard to the respondents having disabled relatives 69.8% did not have disabled persons among their relatives and 30.2% expressed that they had disabled persons among their relatives.

**Table 1: Participants' responses to items on the CATCH scale**

S.No.	Questionnaire	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
1.	I wouldn't mind if a handicapped child sits next to me	86.3	7.2	6.5
2	I wouldn't introduce a handicapped child to my friend	5.3	27.3	67.5
3	Handicapped children can do lots of things themselves	73.5	19.8	6.8
4	I wouldn't know what to say to a handicapped child	31.3	31.3	37.5
5	Handicapped children like to play	61.0	32.3	6.8
6	I feel sorry for handicapped children	66.5	28.0	5.5
7	I would stick up for a handicapped child who was being teased	35.3	26.3	38.5
8	Handicapped children want lots of attention from adults	63.5	25.5	11.0
9	I would invite a handicapped child to my birthday party	39.0	35.5	25.5
10	I would be afraid of a handicapped child	30.5	32.3	37.3
11	I would talk to a handicapped child I didn't know	42.3	26.5	31.3
12	Handicapped children don't like to make friends.	9.0	28.0	62.3
13	I would like a handicapped child to live next-door to me	49.5	32.0	18.5
14	Handicapped children feel sorry for themselves	42	29.3	28.8
15	I would be happy to have a handicapped child for a special friend	46	34	20
16	I would try to stay away from a handicapped child	9.0	31.3	59.8
17	Handicapped children are as happy as I am	63	30.5	6.5
18	I wouldn't like a handicapped friend as much as my other friends	6.8	28.5	64.8
19	Handicapped children know how to behave properly	67	25.8	7.3
20	In class I wouldn't sit next to a handicapped child	11.5	25.3	63.3
21	I would be pleased if a handicapped child invited to me to his house.	45.3	35.3	19.5
22	I try not to look at someone who is handicapped	11	34.5	54.5
23	I would feel good doing a school project with a handicapped child	46.3	39.3	14.5
24	Handicapped children don't have much fun	30.3	35.5	34.3
25	I would invite a handicapped child to sleep over at my house	39	36.3	24.8
26	Being near someone who is handicapped scares me	33.5	28.8	37.8
27	Handicapped children are interested in lots of things.	49.5	37.5	13.0
28	I would be embarrassed if a handicapped child invited me to his birthday	19.5	44.3	36.3
29	I would tell my secret to a handicapped child	51.8	31.8	16.5
30	Handicapped children are often sad	11.3	34.0	54.8
31	I would enjoy being with a handicapped child	42	36	22
32	I would not go to a handicapped child's house to play	22.3	34	43.8
33	Handicapped children can make new friends	33.5	36.5	30.0
34	I feel upset when I see a handicapped child	18	42	40
35	I would miss recess to keep a handicapped child company	35.5	38	26.5
36	Handicapped children need lots of help to do things	62.8	25.8	11.5

Table-1 clearly portrayed the attitude towards children with mild intellectual disability to be positive. To be seated beside fellow children in a classroom is one of the fundamental measures of acceptance shown by a classmate. This item has the highest frequency in the agree column of the response table of the CATCH scale. This response is similar to an item on the questionnaire used by Lupua et al. (2011) in which 98.3% of the respondents were willing to accept a child with disability as a bench mate.

While 30.5% agreed that they would be afraid of disabled children. 11.5% refused to sit next to a child with disability; while 63% agreed with the statement that "Handicapped children are as happy as I am". A major premise of inclusive education is to provide social opportunities for students with disabilities to interact with typically developing peers.

Typically developing children are able to acquire social skills by observing others; however, children with intellectual disabilities need explicit instruction on social skills in a methodical way (Avcioglu, 2012). Avcioglu (2012) also emphasizes the need for early intervention of social skills strategies so that students with disabilities do not fall well behind typically developing peers in socialization. Walton and Ingersoll (2013) agree that early intervention is an important component of social skills intervention. They also suggest that ongoing intervention throughout life is essential to maintain progress.

De Boer et al. (2012) found that students typically become more understanding and accepting of students with disabilities when they have knowledge of what the disabilities are and how they affect their peers. Equipped with this type of knowledge, instead of becoming annoyed by problem behaviors from students with disabilities, typically developing children could understand why the behavior is occurring. Based on this finding, it can be inferred that interventions geared toward typically developing students may be useful in improving attitudes toward students with disabilities.

The socialization of students with disabilities with typically developing children cannot improve without opportunities for these students to interact with each other. According to student responses, the only place typically developing children see students with disabilities is at school.

When children with disabilities are mainstreamed into the general education classroom, they learn to play and interact appropriately with children their own age. Inclusion provides opportunities for socialization and friendships to develop. It provides a sense of belonging and appropriate modeling of social, behavioural, and academic skills. Mainstreaming children with disabilities also helps decrease their aggressive and noncompliant behaviors. It teaches children how to relate with others of different abilities.

Sasso, Simpson & Novak (2005) concluded that when the children with disabilities spend the entire school day with their non-disabled classmates, they are bestowed upon numerous opportunities for social interactions which are unavailable in segregated settings. These opportunities help them develop better communication skills and form friendship with their non-disabled peers.

Attitudes of the non-disabled peers are important in the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in the classroom. The success of integration is determined through contact that children who are disabled and non-disabled children have with one another (Roberts & Lindsell, 1987).

**Table 2: General Data Concerning the Attitude of Peers towards Their Peers with Mild Intellectual Disability in Inclusive Education**

Items	N	Mean	Median	Mode	SD
Affective component	400	20.27	20.0	20	3.901
Behavioral component	400	20.57	21.0	20.0	3.730
Cognitive component	400	9.64	19.64	20.0	3.807
Overall Score	400	60.48	60.0	68	10.157

Table-2 gives a general data concerning the attitude of peers towards their peers with mild intellectual disability. The CATCH scale of 36 items, 12 for each of the following three dimensions of attitudes: affective (e.g. 'I would be afraid of a disabled child'); behavioural (e.g. 'in class I wouldn't sit next to a disabled child'); and cognitive (e.g. 'Disabled children can make new friends').

Conceptually, attitudes are thought to be multidimensional and composed of affective, behavioural, and cognitive components. The affective component addresses feelings and emotional reactions, the behavioural component relates to actual or intended behaviour, and the cognitive component reflects beliefs and knowledge. Past studies have found that children's attitudes are generally more negative towards peers with disabilities than towards non-disabled peers. Numerous

studies have explored attitudes towards peers with disabilities but they are often conducted on small populations and include few associated factors. Females generally demonstrate more positive attitudes than males. Knowing peers with disabilities appears to have a positive effect on children's attitudes.

The affective component of pupils' attitude towards their peers with disabilities is favourable. The average of points of the affective component for the attitude of pupils towards their friends with disabilities is relatively good, 20.27 in the same way the mode is 20.

The behavioural component of pupils' attitude towards their peers with disabilities is favourable. The average of points of the behavioural component for the attitude of pupils towards their friends with disabilities is relatively good, 20.57. In the same way the mode is 20.

The cognitive component of pupils' attitude towards their peers with disabilities is not favourable. The average of points of the cognitive component for the attitude of pupils towards their friends with disabilities is not good, 19.64. In the same way the mode is 20.

The pupils' attitude towards their peers with disabilities is positive, but there is still a lot to be done in this aspect. The affective and behavioural components of the pupils' attitude towards their peers with disabilities are favourable, whereas the cognitive component of the attitude of the pupils towards their peers with disabilities is not favourable.

The gender of the pupils influences the general attitude and influences the results of affective and behavioural component of pupils' attitude towards their peers with disabilities. Girls have a more positive attitude towards their peers with disabilities than boys. Also, girls have a higher average of points for the affective and behavioural components of the attitude than the average of boys.

**Table 3: Z test on scores of male participants' attitude towards children with mild intellectual disabled**

Group	Total Mean $\pm$ SD	Affective Mean $\pm$ SD	Behaviour Mean $\pm$ SD	Cognitive Mean $\pm$ SD
Male students having a close relative/friend with disability	63.35 $\pm$ 9.673	21.17 $\pm$ 3.761	21.30 $\pm$ 3.641	20.80 $\pm$ 3.766
Male students without a close relative/friend with disability	59.74 $\pm$ 10.13	20.09 $\pm$ 3.756	20.06 $\pm$ 3.499	19.59 $\pm$ 4.019
Df	198	198	198	198
Z-statistic	2.572	2.024	2.463	2.181
P-value	0.011*	0.044*	0.015*	0.030*

\* -Significant

Table-3 depicts male students who had a close friend/relative with disability had higher total scores (M=63.35, SD =9.673) than those who did not (M=59.74, SD =10.13),  $z(198)=2.5, p=0.011$  which indicates a better attitude towards children with intellectual disability.

Gollnick & Chinn 2002; McDougall et al. (2004) Children in contact with a child with mild intellectual disability express more positive attitudes, but have more difficulty engaging in a personal interaction with the specific child (Gash 1993; Manetti et al. 2001), because the presence of labels and the behavioural characteristics of the child with intellectual disabilities (Siperstein et al. 2007).

According to Smith-D'Arezzo (2003), students' perceptions of peers with disabilities is linked with exposure (or lack thereof) to family members with disabilities. Further, a significant difference was found to exist between the mean ratings of those participants who indicated having a family member or a close friend with a disability, and those who had not had such contact. Those respondents who had a family member or close friend with a disability appeared to hold more positive attitudes toward including students with disabilities into the mainstream classroom. Harvey (1985) in a Victorian study reported that individuals who have family members or close friends with a disability may hold more positive attitudes toward inclusive education.

**Table 4: Z test on scores of female participants' attitude towards children with mild intellectual disabled**

Group	Total Mean $\pm$ SD	Affective Mean $\pm$ SD	Behaviour Mean $\pm$ SD	Cognitive Mean $\pm$ SD
female students having a close relative/friend with disability	64.65 $\pm$ 11.286	21.65 $\pm$ 4.453	22.22 $\pm$ 4.123	20.78 $\pm$ 4.243
Female students without a close relative / friend with disability	60.44 $\pm$ 10.974	20.18 $\pm$ 4.215	20.82 $\pm$ 3.968	19.44 $\pm$ 3.905
Df	198	198	198	198
Z-statistic	2.637	2.366	2.423	2.301
P-value	0.009*	0.019*	0.016*	0.022*

\*Significant

Table-4 reveals that among the participants, females students who had a close friend/relative with disability had significantly higher total score ( $M=64.65$ ,  $SD=11.286$ ) that having a family member with a disability significantly increased CATCH scores, but only if it was a close family member (parent or sibling). Students having a friend with a disability, but not those who simply knew such peers, reported significantly higher CATCH scores.

Tirosh et al. (1997) also demonstrated the effect of gender in their study. According to him girls generally had more positive attitude towards students with disability. They showed that Canadian girls had significantly higher scores on the CATCH scale than their male counterparts.

Seven studies addressed gender differences in attitudes towards peers with (different types of) disabilities. The results clearly showed a significant effect of gender; girls were found to hold more positive attitudes than boys.

Among personal characteristics, the most common determinant of children's attitudes towards peers with disabilities is sex, with females generally showing more positive attitudes than males. In our study, females also showed more positive attitudes than male as girls being more favourable attitude towards children with disability.

**Table 5: Major findings about attitudes of Normal students towards children with mild intellectual disability**

1.	Most students wouldn't mind if a child with disability sits next to them in class.
2.	Most students believe that children with disability can do lots of things for themselves.
3.	Most of the students feel sorry for handicapped children.
4.	Handicapped children wants lots of attention from the adults and needs lot of help to do things
5.	Handicapped children like to play.

## CONCLUSION

The present study demonstrates that social contacts make a difference to attitudes of students in inclusive schools in Trichy district towards their peers with mild intellectual disability. This study can contribute towards knowledge in implementing inclusive education programmes in Trichy district.

Programmes should be designed towards changing the cognitive dimensions of attitude by providing information to clarify misconceptions, thereby promoting social inclusion and development of children with intellectual disability.

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