



Children's contact with disabled people linked with having more positive attitudes about disability

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

Key findings

- 1,881 children, aged 7-16 years from 20 schools in Devon completed questionnaires measuring their contact with disabled people and their attitudes towards disability.
- Anxiety about interacting with disabled people, and empathy for them, were also measured using children's responses to the questionnaires.
- Children with more self-reported contact with disabled people reported more positive attitudes towards disability. Those with more contact also reported less anxiety and greater empathy.
- This evidence suggests that providing opportunities for contact with disabled people, that reduces anxiety and increases empathy, could be an effective intervention to improve attitudes, and should be explored further.

Who did the study and why?

This survey was part of research on promoting positive attitudes towards disability. The work was led by Megan, a PhD student with Peninsula Cerebra Research Unit (PenCRU) at the University of Exeter Medical School.

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 originated from members of the PenCRU Family Faculty; parent carers experienced negative attitudes to disability as a major barrier to leading ordinary lives. The aim of the survey was to explore ways in which children's attitudes towards disability could potentially be improved.

Background

Contact between members from different social groups (e.g., different races) has shown to improve attitudes towards each other.

Our [systematic review](#) found that although researchers had explored children's attitudes towards disability and contact with disabled people before, the research was of poor quality and did not examine empathy and anxiety.

If contact is associated with children's attitudes towards disabled people, then increasing contact could be an important aspect of educational strategies to improve attitudes towards disability.

What did we do?

This type of study involves [quantitative research](#). The [analysis is done using statistical tests](#). The survey included standard questionnaires used to measure attitudes, anxiety and empathy.

This survey was cross-sectional, which means all [the data](#) was collected at one point in time.

How did we gather data?

Mainstream schools across Devon (in South West England) were invited to take part between March and July 2012.

Parents/caregivers were sent information in advance and could decline their children taking part. On the day, children were asked to take part and did so only if they wanted to participate.

The survey questionnaire was administered during a scheduled class, either online or using a paper-based version at the schools' preference. Children were assured that their responses were confidential.

All children aged 7-16 years old were able to take part. Only answers from children who said they were not disabled were included in the analysis.

What did we measure?

Children completed standard questionnaires that enabled us to measure their:

- Attitudes towards disability (feelings and beliefs about disabled people, and how they might behave around disabled people).
- Contact with disabled people (friends, family members, and time spent with them).
- Empathy (whether they can understand how disabled people might feel).
- Anxiety (worry or unease about interacting with disabled people).
- Similarity perceptions (whether disabled and nondisabled people were different/similar).
- Gender, age and school year were included when completing the survey.

We also noted from routinely collected statistics:

- The proportion of children at each school registered as having special educational needs or disability (SEND), as an indicator of likely informal contact at school.
- The proportion of children receiving free school meals, as an indicator of school socio-economic status.

What did we find?

Children who reported having more contact with disabled people were more likely to have positive attitudes towards disabled people than those who had less contact.

Children who had more contact with disabled people tended to have more positive attitudes about disability. This association was linked with higher levels of empathy and lower levels of anxiety about interacting with disabled people. Girls, primary school children and those who thought of disabled and nondisabled people as similar tended to hold more positive attitudes.

The percentage of children receiving free school meals, and proportion with SEN, at schools was not linked with children's attitudes towards.

Limitations of the research

The study was conducted in an area where the majority of children are 'white British'. Findings may differ in locations with more ethnically diverse populations, which should be tested. Also, free school meals may not be an accurate indicator of socio-economic status in schools.

We cannot conclude that contact with disabled children improves attitudes towards disability, as the survey was cross-sectional. However, previous research that explored contact between other social groups (e.g., between races) has found that increasing contact does typically improve attitudes.

What's next?

This survey highlights the importance of contact with disabled people and children's attitudes to disability. The results suggest that educational strategies aiming to improve children's attitudes to disabled people should include aspects of contact. These might be direct contact through meeting people, or perhaps using videos and other media. The educational intervention could incorporate strategies that develop empathy for disabled people, and seek to reduce anxiety about interacting with disabled people.

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

- The survey is published in a journal called [Disability and Rehabilitation](#).
- Before the journal accepted the paper to be published an independent reviewer and the editor decided whether it had been properly conducted and whether it was important enough to publish.

If you would like to read the full version of the survey paper, please contact Megan Armstrong at

megan.armstrong@ucl.ac.uk

or get in contact with us at

pencru@exeter.ac.uk

- The team that carried out the survey are Megan Armstrong (PhD researcher with PenCRU), Chris Morris (Senior Research Fellow in Child Health), Mark Tarrant (Senior Lecturer in Psychology applied to Health), Charles Abraham (Professor of Psychology Applied to Health) and Obi Ukoumunne (Associate Professor in Medical Statistics).
- The research team were 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.
- This research was funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Collaboration for Leadership in Applied Health Research and Care of the South West Peninsula (PenCLAHRC) through a [PhD studentship](#), and the charity Cerebra. The views and opinions expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the NHS, the NIHR, the Department of Health, or Cerebra.