

Changing attitudes to learning disability:

A review of the evidence

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Lay Summary

Overview

Improving attitudes to people with a learning disability is a key priority for Mencap. This review provides an overview of previous attempts to change attitudes towards learning disability, identifies gaps in the evidence and suggests ways forward.

Why this is important

Negative attitudes towards people with a learning disability have a significant impact on their lives. People with a learning disability are often socially excluded and exposed to negative perceptions and unwelcome behaviours. Many are prevented from equal participation in education, employment, leisure and social pursuits. Not only are they often targets of verbal and physical harassment and abuse, in some cases they are the victims of horrific hate crimes.

More needs to be done to tackle negative attitudes to individuals with a learning disability, and to break down barriers that stop people with a learning disability from being accepted within society, and from accessing a wide range of opportunities and experiences taken for granted by people who do not have a disability are not disabled.

What are attitudes?

Attitudes are made up of three parts:

- a cognitive component (how we think about something),
- an emotional component (how we feel about something)
- a behavioural component (how we act towards something)

Sometimes people associate 'attitudes' with just the cognitive component (what we think), in other fields the term 'stigma' has been used because it more explicitly covers all three parts. However, to date, stigma has rarely been used in the learning disabilities field. Hence, this report uses the term attitudes when describing work in the learning disabilities field.

Past research

There is relatively little large scale research into the general population's understanding of learning disability and their attitudes towards people with a learning disability. However, the few studies that have taken place suggest there is widespread confusion about learning disability and that misconceptions, for example that people with a learning disability

can do little for themselves, are common. It has been suggested that a reluctance to interact with people with learning disabilities may arise from misconceptions like this.

Misconceptions and discrimination affect the daily lives of people with learning disabilities, limiting the opportunities available to them, and whether they are active participants in their communities and society at large. Therefore education about learning disability will likely need to be one component of efforts to improve attitudes.

Limitations of past research

There have been many interventions from different parts of the world that aim to change attitudes towards people with a learning disability in some way. Many of these have shown promising results, however, there are a number of methodological limitations with past interventions that are important to note:

- They often have small numbers of people in the study, which limits how confident we can be that their results apply more widely.
- They often target students and volunteers, who may be more inclined to feel positive towards people with a learning disability, rather than participants who are representative of the general population.
- They often fail to take repeated measures of people's attitude or knowledge. Instead participants are often asked afterwards to report on any changes in their attitude. This is an unreliable means of evaluating any intervention.
- They often fail to take follow-up measurements. They do not go back some time after the intervention to see if any changes in attitude still exist.
- The way that attitudes are measured in interventions is inconsistent and

sometimes poor. This means it is hard to compare across studies and judge how successful they have been.

- Often interventions have not been based on theories of attitudes and attitude change. This makes it difficult to convincingly explain why any changes in attitude or behaviour have happened, or to build on and improve the intervention.
- Most studies have failed to test whether the attitude change interventions has led to a change in how people actually behave towards people with a learning disability.

What works to change attitudes?

Despite these limitations there is consistency in the research on some factors and we can make the following recommendations:

- Direct personal contact with people with a learning disability is most likely to improve attitudes. This contact should be positive and challenge negative stereotypes. If direct personal contact is impossible then indirect contact, e.g. through videos, has may also been found to be effective, although its effects appear weaker than direct contact. Accordingly, people with a learning disability should be directly involved in delivering attitude change interventions.
- For the general public large scale direct contact is difficult to achieve, so greater indirect contact through the media should be pursued. For children and young people direct contact should be facilitated through inclusive activities and inclusive education. For professionals who are likely to be in regular contact with people with learning disabilities, direct contact should be part of training and continuing professional development.

- Education of the general public should be part of efforts to counter prejudice and discrimination. The media have a role to play in providing more positive portrayals that don't depict people with a learning disability as incapable, childlike or pitiable victims.
- For there to be more direct contact with the general public, people with a learning disability need to have equal participation in education, employment, social and leisure pursuits. Therefore, fighting for the rights of people with learning disabilities to have increased access to community resources must be part of efforts to change attitudes.
- Efforts to educate and challenge the formation of prejudice directed at individuals with learning disabilities should start at an early age.
- Interventions and awareness projects from all stakeholders, including charities, should have carefully designed evaluation built in from the outset, to develop our understanding of the best routes to tackling negative attitudes to learning disability.