Attitudes matter

Societies in our global community are at different points on the timeline towards meaningful inclusion for disabled children and young people.

During the 20th century, disabled children in the United Kingdom were viewed as vulnerable, helpless, and to be pitied. Medical letters about them included words such as ‘crippled’, ‘handicapped’, and ‘this unfortunate child’.

It was less than 50 years ago in the UK that the classification of disabled children as uneducable was outlawed; only 15 years ago that UK legislation prohibited discrimination against disabled children in education; and 10 years ago when legislation actively promoted the removal of barriers that could prevent disabled children from participating in mainstream education. The UK Equality Act has brought together all discrimination legislation, including disability, as one of nine protected characteristics that must not be used as a reason to treat some people worse than others in our society.

So where are we now? There is still much to be done. In 2011, television journalists exposed the horrific abuse of people with learning disabilities and autism at a care home in southern England. The Confidential Inquiry into the premature deaths of people with learning disabilities (CIPOLD) revealed ongoing inequalities in access to health care and worse outcomes. Our everyday clinical practice in the UK bears witness that disabled children and young people continue to be pitied, patronized, undervalued, and abused in our society. Those in different countries and settings will know how their societies compare to this.

In the UK there is light on the horizon. The Children and Families Act 2014 encourages person-centered planning, placing the child or young person’s view and that of their parents as central to decision-making about what should be done to achieve the outcomes that matter to them. In 2013, the Department of Health (England) funded ‘Disability Matters’. Led by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health in partnership with a range of colleges, voluntary organizations, the British Academy of Childhood Disability, and the British Paediatric Neurology Association, this is an initiative that challenges and aspires to positively change the attitudes of those who may work or volunteer with disabled children and young people in health, education, social care, criminal justice, leisure, tourism, transport, and community and faith groups.

A suite of 57 e-learning sessions on subjects carefully chosen after extensive consultation (including consultation with disabled children and young people), from ‘What is Disability?’, ‘Feelings Matter’, ‘Advocacy Matters’, ‘Environmental Challenges Matter’ to ‘Transition Matters’ are being co-produced with disabled young people, parent carers, and key stakeholders across statutory and voluntary agencies. The e-learning programme (including suggested learning packages and pathways for different workforce sectors) is freely available to everyone, across all sectors of society, internationally.

Supporting resources encouraging facilitated group learning in local areas, in partnership with disabled children and young people and parent carers, are included. The resources have much relevance regardless of country or setting. Attitudes transcend geography, culture, and language.

Our societies are made up of the sum of the attitudes of the individuals who live in them. Let us aspire to be a global community where everyone proactively includes, values, and warmly welcomes disabled people of all ages as the default position. May we think ahead about any challenges or barriers that might prevent disabled people from being able to choose to join in with everyday activities or access services the same as anyone else, creatively and imaginatively problem-solving with them about how challenges and barriers might best be overcome in a way that is acceptable to them. Check out ‘Disability Matters’ at www.disabilitymatters.org.uk. Be inspired by the lived experiences and stories of disabled children, young people, and their families. See what else you can do to make a positive difference and let others know about it. Together we can make the world of difference. Positive, ‘can do’ attitudes cost nothing.

KAREN HARRIDGE
Chair, British Academy of Childhood Disability
Sunderland Royal Hospital – Paediatrics, Sunderland, UK.

doi: 10.1111/dmcn.12663

REFERENCES