

Water and Sanitation

It is a widely acknowledged but little documented fact that throughout the developing world, persons with disabilities routinely face particular difficulties in accessing safe drinking water and basic sanitation.

Physical barriers

This means that children with physical impairments may be unable to collect water or carry it for long distances; others may find well walls and water taps too high. Washroom doors can be difficult to manipulate and there may be nowhere to rest the water container while filling it, or there may be nothing to hold on to for balance to avoid falling into a well, pond or toilet. Long or slippery paths and poor lighting also limit the use of latrines by children with disabilities. These physical barriers ultimately undermine their health, dignity and the development of children globally.

Social barriers

Barriers to persons with disabilities extend beyond physical and design issues. Social barriers vary in different cultures. Children with disabilities often face stigma and discrimination when using household and public facilities, for example whilst at school. Wholly inaccurate fears that children with disabilities will contaminate water sources or soil latrines are frequently reported.

Protection risks

When children or adolescents, and particularly girls, with disabilities are forced to use different facilities than other members of their households, or are compelled to use them at different times, they are at increased risk of accidents and physical attack, including rape.

Issues preventing disabled children from accessing water and sanitation in such settings may vary depending on cultural and geographical context, as well as by the type of disability a child may have: a child with a physical impairment may face significant difficulties in using a hand pump or an outdoor latrine; a child who is deaf or who has an intellectual disability may have little physical difficulty but be vulnerable to teasing or abuse, which can render these facilities inaccessible.

Impact on education and nutrition

Children with disabilities might not attend school for want of an accessible toilet, particularly in the case of girls, for whom menstrual hygiene management can be a challenge. Children with disabilities often report that they try to drink and eat less to cut down the number of times they need to go to the toilet, especially if they have to ask someone to help them. This adds to the risk that these children will be poorly nourished. It is also cause for concern that in some places, new water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities are still being designed and built without adequate concern for children with disabilities.

Building accessible child-friendly facilities

Low-tech, low-cost interventions for persons with disabilities are increasingly available – new step latrines and easy-to-use water pumps, for example. Ensuring the availability of child-friendly water, sanitation and hygiene facilities in schools is essential in ensuring all children fulfill their right to education.

Community involvement

Outside of school, Community Approaches to Total Sanitation (CATS) also help to ensure that communities support people living with disabilities to have access to their own, safe and appropriate toilets and hand



washing facilities. UNICEF will continue to support such programmes in order to ensure that children with disabilities have access to the water, sanitation and hygiene facilities that are so vital for their health, dignity and development.

A question of human rights

Under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), all children have the right to the highest attainable standard of health. It follows that children with disabilities are equally entitled to the full spectrum of care, which includes access to water, sanitation and hygiene. These Conventions place clear duties and obligations on States and other duty bearers to respect, protect and fulfill these rights.

A call to action

Progress made towards increasing access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation facilities for children with disabilities has varied between and within countries, however, too many still find themselves with limited access, affecting their health, dignity and development. Adopting an approach to water and sanitation programming that is grounded in respect for the rights, aspirations and potential of all children can improve the quality of life of children with disabilities. Fundamental elements and actions to ensure disability-inclusive water and sanitation response include:

- Ratify and implement the Conventions (CRPD and CRC).
- Fight discrimination against children with disabilities.
- Dismantle socio-economic and other barriers to inclusion.
- End residential institutionalization.
- Provide families with social welfare, health and other services to meet their needs.
- Ensure that national standards are aligned with international standards and support their implementation.
- Coordinate services among sectors to support the child.
- Involve children with disabilities in making decisions.
- Collect reliable and objective data to inform planning and assess impact.



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UNICEF's 2013 flagship report, *The State of the World's Children*, focuses on Children with Disabilities. The report covers a range of thematic areas and attempts to contribute to the global discussion on and draw greater attention to disability rights for children.

This thematic note presents excerpts from the report related to Water and Sanitation. All references and original sources can be found in the full report.

For the full report or more information:

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