

Reducing stigma and discrimination against children with disabilities

Children with disabilities face widespread stigma and discrimination based on deeply rooted negative perceptions about disability. These attitudes and beliefs reflect what is known as “ableism”; a value system that discriminates against people with disabilities based on the idea that certain ways of appearance, functioning and behaviour are essential for living a life of value.

Due to ableist assumptions, children with disabilities are considered to be in need of “fixing”, less able to contribute and participate, less worthy of attention, and in general to have less inherent value than others. That is why eliminating stigma and discrimination is a human rights imperative.

For too long, practitioners developing interventions to reduce stigma and discrimination against children with disabilities have been working in the dark. When it comes to changing behaviours, attitudes and social norms to make families, communities, schools, health care and social services truly inclusive of children with disabilities, there isn't much evidence

of what works and what does not. As we especially don't know what leads to long-term change, we risk wasting time and resources on programmes that will not deliver sustainable results.

To address this gap UNICEF, together with Oxford Policy Management, Leonard Cheshire and the P4EC Consultancy Group,

has now mapped the available evidence on communication for social and behaviour change (C4SBC) interventions addressing stigma and discrimination against children with disabilities.

The new report, titled *Communication for Social and Behavioural Change Interventions to Strengthen Disability-Inclusive Programming: A synthesis of the evidence*, draws on peer-reviewed academic literature as well as case studies documenting experience from the field, in the Europe and Central Asia region and beyond. Because evidence specific to children with disabilities is scarce, the report also examines interventions designed for other stigmatized groups, including adults with disabilities; marginalized ethnic groups, especially Roma; and people living with HIV.

The report highlights a number of promising practices and principles, creating a framework that researchers and practitioners can build

upon as they develop and assess disability-inclusive programming that achieves long-term impact.

What works?

The evidence shows that real impact comes from a multifaceted approach. Stigma and discrimination are multi-faceted and ubiquitous. Children with disabilities encounter them in the media they consume, in their communities, at school, when they seek health care, among friends, within their own families – and even within themselves, as they internalize negative beliefs and attitudes. When it comes to reducing stigma and discrimination, interventions that address multiple socioecological levels, target multiple audiences, and combine communications, advocacy and programming are documented to be more effective than standalone initiatives.

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A holistic and participatory approach to changing behaviours, attitudes and social norms

C4SBC, also known as Communication for Development (C4D), is a participatory process that uses communication platforms and tools to stimulate positive social and behavioural change. It engages children, families and communities, service providers and decision-makers to share ideas and build knowledge – and thereby empower people to take actions that improve their lives.

C4SBC interventions take a holistic approach and operate at different socioecological levels, addressing attitudes, behaviours and norms that shape how people see themselves (at the intrapersonal level) as well as how they relate to each other in interpersonal relationships, within communities, in institutions like schools and health care facilities, and across wider society.



At the level of institutions like schools, a holistic approach is key to reducing stigma and discrimination and supporting real inclusion.

Effective interventions create a shared vision and shared responsibility for inclusion among the entire school, as well as an institutional scaffolding to support changes in attitudes and behaviours. They address both supply and demand, helping to ensure that schools provide inclusive education, through everything from policies, regulations and budgets to curricula, teaching and facilities – while also supporting students, families and communities to abandon stigma and embrace inclusive education.

Parents and families are critical partners in reducing stigma and discrimination.

Their role can be strengthened through interventions that give them a voice and engage them in advocacy. For example, an intervention in Ukraine provided an opportunity for parents of children with disabilities to tell the stories of their children's birth and early years, and used these to successfully advocate for early childhood intervention services in two cities and one region.

Integrated, multi-level strategies can make a difference

- In Nicaragua, the TV soap opera *Sexto Sentido* featured relatable characters and storylines that promoted gender equity and delivered accurate information about HIV. A series of group discussions engaged community members on the issues presented, leading to increased support for gender-equitable norms and more open communication about sexual behaviour and HIV prevention.
- Studies from Europe and Turkey show that the involvement of both families and community representatives makes a difference in Roma students' educational inclusion and their success in school.
- Workshops on empathic listening – plus exposure to the testimonies of people with disabilities – were shown to reduce stigmatizing attitudes among medical and social care professionals in the UK.
- In Senegal, hearing the first-person stories of men who have sex with men led journalists to change the way they wrote about this vulnerable and stigmatized group. No offensive or stigmatizing stories were published over the 18 months following the workshops.



Contact between members of stigmatized groups and others plays a key role in reducing stigma and discrimination, if it is on equal footing and aims towards a shared goal.

Programmes that engage children with and without disabilities in unified sports have been shown to reduce stigmatizing attitudes, as have theatre initiatives for young people with and without mental health conditions. Educational activities like cooperative learning and peer tutoring have had a positive impact as well, improving social interactions between children with and without disabilities and enhancing the social acceptance of the latter.

Storytelling and sharing of personal testimonies can be powerful tools to reduce stigma and advocate for change.

Facilitating the voices of members of stigmatized groups – for instance through Photovoice, an approach using images to help children with communication impairments articulate their experiences and concerns – can strengthen self-efficacy and reduce self-stigma, while empowering children to advocate for themselves. Initiatives that reach the whole of society, through mass media and opinion leaders, have a role to play as well, by amplifying children’s stories and voices and spreading accurate information.

Participatory interventions fight stigma and discrimination – and nurture young advocates for change

The participation of children and young people in C4SBC interventions, from design to implementation, builds their self-esteem and self-efficacy and can help change stigmatizing attitudes and behaviours.

Lessons can be applied from successful interventions like Oxfam’s multi-country My Rights My Voice campaign, which engaged marginalized young people across eight countries to advocate for their rights to health care and education. When equipped

with information and training to build their awareness, self-efficacy and advocacy skills, the young people became a strong, positive force for change.

The 2030 and Counting initiative by Leonard Cheshire and partners, currently under way in Kenya, the Philippines and Zambia, takes a similar approach, supporting young people with disabilities to become citizen journalists monitoring their countries’ progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

Building evidence, developing practical tools, promoting inclusion

Changing attitudes, behaviours and social norms that underlie the stigma and discrimination faced by children with disabilities is a complex process. Practitioners need a set of evidence-based, practical tools, so that resources can be directed towards interventions that produce lasting change and can be taken to scale, to achieve wider impact. Building a robust global knowledge base on C4SBC interventions to reduce stigma and discrimination against children with disabilities will require:

- Reliable monitoring and evaluation tools to track and assess the results of interventions, with a focus on their potential to create lasting change and scale up for wider impact.
- Careful consideration of how successful approaches targeting other marginalized groups can be adapted to address stigma and discrimination faced by children with disabilities.
- A deep, nuanced understanding of target populations and their specific contexts, based on detailed social and behavioural data, and reinforced with pre-testing.
- Community engagement – and the participation of children with disabilities themselves – in developing, implementing and monitoring solutions.

Alongside access to inclusive services, policies that address stigma and discrimination, and adequate financing to put them into practice, C4SBC interventions can make a critical contribution to building more inclusive societies in which people with disabilities are empowered, have access to the services they need, and participate in their communities on an equal basis with all other individuals.



Countering stigma and discrimination against children with disabilities: A call for action

- Invest in integrated, evidence-based, multi-level strategies to address negative attitudes, beliefs, norms, stigma and discrimination against children with disabilities, and make services more accessible and inclusive.
- Empower service providers and communities to support the inclusion of children and adults with disabilities, and enable their access to inclusive services.
- Enact policies that address stigma and discrimination against children with disabilities and their families, and ensure that the requisite finances are in place to implement them.