

# Disabled children do matter

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Many disabled children fail to reach their full potential because they continue to be marginalised in schools, health and social care, according to new research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

"We found that [disabled children](#) often experience discrimination, exclusion and even violence," say Professor Dan Goodley and Dr Katherine Runswick-Cole, who implemented the study at the Manchester Metropolitan University. "The biggest barriers they meet are the attitudes of other people and widespread forms of institutional discrimination."

"Disabled children are seldom allowed to play and act like other children because of concerns about their 'leaky and unruly' bodies. But our study shows that many children who don't fit the narrow definition of 'normal' have untapped reserves of potential and high [aspirations](#) which can be fulfilled when their families receive effective support. There are also many amazing families who should be celebrated for the way they fight for their children." continues Professor Goodley.

The aim of the Does Every Child Matter, post Blair? project was to find out what life is like for disabled children and young people in the context of policy changes set in motion by the New Labour Government after 1997. The Aiming High for Disabled Children policy agenda was intended to enable disabled children to be 'healthy', 'stay safe', 'enjoy and achieve', 'make a positive contribution' and 'achieve economic well-being'.

The findings, which are based on a series of interviews with disabled children and their families, reveal numerous barriers to these goals, for example:

- Disabled children are often perceived by educational and care professionals as "lacking" and as failing to fit in with the image of 'normal';
- Families who do not match the norm are frequently excluded from [friendships](#), education and work;
- The support system is complicated and there are gaps in provision, particularly during the transition to adulthood;
- Physical access and transport barriers to sport and leisure activities result in segregation, while participation in art and creative activities is limited;
- Widespread discriminatory attitudes threaten to create a culture of bullying;
- Families of children with life-limiting/threatening impairments often experience isolation and poverty

The researchers call for a change of attitude towards disability so that diversity is not only valued, but promoted. "There is an 'epidemic' of labelling children as disabled," Professor Goodley and Dr Runswick-Cole warn. "Parents are repeatedly under pressure to talk about what their children can't do in order to access services and support, but sometimes the label can obscure the individual. Families should be asked what support their child requires, not what is the 'matter' with him or her."

Their report recommends that policy should prioritise enabling disabled children to break down barriers by supporting their participation in education, the arts, leisure and their communities and by meeting their communication requirements. "We need to re-think the culture of individualism and performance which pushes disabled children out"

continue the researchers. "Pressures on schools are getting worse. We found a case where parents of non-disabled children petitioned to exclude a disabled child. What does this say about the meaning of education and community?"

The study found that bullying is often accepted as inevitable when disabled children are perceived as vulnerable. There were several layers of violence, from manhandling in school to psychological bullying, which often goes unnoticed by adults. Some children do however stand up to bullies and refuse to be limited by labels that are imposed upon them.

One young person insisted on attending Brownies meetings alone, despite health and safety rules that required her mother to accompany her. "Kids seem to enjoy challenging people's expectations about their limitations," the researchers commented.

Provided by Economic & Social Research Council

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