

Kids' attitudes toward disabled people improve with contact

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More empathy, less anxiety pave way for better relationships, study finds.

(HealthDay)—Children's attitudes toward people with disabilities improve when kids have more contact with them, according to a new study.

Greater exposure to people with disabilities could help reduce discrimination and prevent the low self-esteem and depression that can result, the findings suggest.

"Schools vary in the number of students with [special educational needs](#) and disability," study author Megan MacMillan, of the University of Exeter Medical School in England, said in a British Psychological Society news release. "We predicted that if children manage to make more contact with [disabled people](#), better relationships are built."

The study involved 1,520 children ranging in age from 7 to 16. The

children were surveyed on their attitudes about disabled people. They also were asked about their contact with those living with disabilities as well as their feelings of anxiety or [empathy](#) toward them.

Children with greater direct contact with disabled people had less anxiety about them, which also resulted in better attitudes, the study revealed.

Moreover, even indirect contact can help ease children's anxiety about disabled people and make them more empathetic toward them. For example, the research showed that just observing other people interact with disabled people or being aware of other people's [friendships](#) with them improved children's attitudes.

"We have known for some time that integrating children with disabilities into the regular classroom can improve attitudes. What we have established here is just how much of a difference a greater presence in day-to-day life makes," MacMillan said. "The effort to improve attitudes is worthwhile, as [negative attitudes](#) are often internalized. Improving attitudes can have long-lasting effects and can help [children with disabilities](#) to succeed."

The study findings were expected to be presented Thursday at the British Psychological Society conference at the University of Exeter. The data and conclusions should be viewed as preliminary until published in a peer-reviewed journal.

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provides more information on [child development](#).

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