

Peer Group Evaluations and Norms: Are Children With Learning Difficulties Accepted in Inclusive Classrooms?

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Background

Research suggests that children with special needs who attend inclusive schools are at risk of being socially neglected or rejected by their classmates, and to face negative peer attitudes. Since negative social experiences can lead to social isolation and an increase in the likelihood of being bullied, perhaps it is no surprise that peer acceptance is one of the most important factors associated with successful inclusion at school.

Children's positive attitudes towards classmates with learning difficulties have been found to be associated with several factors, including: regular social interactions between children with and without disabilities, beliefs teachers hold and express about students with disabilities, having a friend with a disability, and receiving information about disabilities from parents or the media. However, it has not yet been determined if children's attitudes towards classmates with learning difficulties are related to what they think their classmates believe, and if these beliefs are related to age.

Research Questions: What did we want to know?

The purpose of our study was to investigate whether there is an association (a relationship) between age and children's attitudes towards classmates with learning difficulties.

How do children who strongly identify with others who find learning "easy" or who finding learning "hard" evaluate classmates who belong to their own group or to the other group?

In our study, we chose to use the phrases 'learning is easy' and 'learning is hard' rather than formal, clinical terms, because they reflect the simple everyday language used and understood by elementary school children to convey differences between children with and without learning difficulties.



Participants and Method: What did we do?

Participants. One hundred and ninety-two children (91 girls and 101 boys) attending two inclusive elementary schools participated in our study. The schools were located in predominantly suburban middle-class neighbourhoods, and participants were from grades 1 through 8.

Procedure. Students were given a four-part booklet that assessed group judgements and attitudes towards children with or without learning difficulties. Using a face response scale (pictured right), students first answered questions evaluating how they felt about children who found learning "easy" or who found learning "hard". Next, children were asked to choose from positive (e.g., happy, friendly, smart, nice) and negative (e.g., unfriendly, stupid, mean, selfish) adjectives to describe children who "find school work easy" or "find school work hard". Finally, students were asked to read one of two stories about children with or without learning difficulties. In one story, a child makes comments that favour children without learning difficulties, and in the other story a child makes comments that favour children with learning difficulties. In each story, the biased child makes statements in support of his or her own group and unsupportive of the other group, while a second child makes statements that support both his or her own group and the other group (see definitions at right).

Results: What did we find?

Similar to past research, group judgements and attitudes showed that participants were more positive towards children without learning difficulties than towards children with learning difficulties. Age was unrelated to these attitudes.

Second, we found that participants were inclined to identify more strongly with children without learning difficulties than with children with learning difficulties. Younger children had stronger group identification than did older children. As children get older, they become more flexible in their understanding of within group variations and between group similarities.

We also found that older children were more inclined to believe that comments made by the biased child were more typical than those made by the unbiased child. On the other hand, younger children tended to believe that the unbiased child's comments were more typical than those of the biased child. Thus, older children may have a better understanding that biased comments about the learning ability of others are more the norm than not.

In sum, we found that participants were able to distinguish between biased and unbiased children, had clear biases against children with learning difficulties, and believed that being a child without learning difficulties is more desirable than being a child with learning difficulties.

Materials and Definitions

Biased Child: fictional child who finds learning easy (or hard), and favours other children who also find learning easy (or hard). For example,

I think kids who find learning easy are better than kids who find learning hard. Kids who find learning easy will do well on the test. Even if kids who find learning hard do OK on the test, I will still think that kids who find learning easy are better.

Unbiased Child: fictional child who shows no favouritism towards children that find learning easy or hard. For example,

I think it's great when kids who find learning easy do well on tests. They are awesome kids. But when kids who find learning hard do well on tests, I always feel happy for them too.

Face Response Scale:



Educational Implications and Summary

Children believed that balanced opinions (i.e., providing supportive comments about children with *and* children without learning difficulties) were better than opinions that reflected discrimination. However, negative judgments and attitudes towards children with learning difficulties was found. These discrepant findings suggest that children may recognize the need to be fair-minded in how they evaluate others negative attitudes towards children with learning difficulties continue to persist.

Negative judgements toward children with learning difficulties need to be replaced with positive evaluations that focus on the worth of the whole person rather than on a single characteristic. Thus, educators and parents should focus on emphasizing the positive attributes of *all* children in the classroom and elsewhere, and encourage positive interactions between children with and without learning difficulties. Peer acceptance is one of the most important factors associated with successful inclusion at school and in the community. Knowing what children believe and what they think about the beliefs of other children are important in understanding the complexities of group dynamics as they play out in elementary school classrooms.

For more information, please refer to:

Nowicki, E.A. (2011). Intergroup evaluations and norms about learning ability. *Social Development, 20*, 1-17.