

THE EDUCATION OF MENTALLY CHALLENGED CHILDREN: ROLE OF PARENTS AND COMMUNITY

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“When schools and families work together, a partnership of support for children develops. Education becomes a shared venture, characterized by mutual respect and trust in which the importance and influence of each partner is recognized. Although children, families, teachers, and schools benefit individually, their partnership enhances the entire process of education.”

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Abstract

As for any other group, education is critical to expanding the life prospects of people with disabilities. The socialization of children with disabilities (CWD) through education assumes an unusually important role in societies such as India where social exclusion of PWD is significant. The parents are the first and most important teachers for children, as they play the role of teaching during interaction with children. The family has an important influence upon children as they stay at home much longer than at school as well as more in-family interaction than schooling. In recent decades, many scholars' research findings show that parent and community involvement can help improve the performance of students, foster their positive attitudes and behavior, promote their involvement and learning motivation

So keeping in view the importance of parents and community in the rehabilitation of mentally challenged children an effort has been made to explore the role of parents and community in education of mentally challenged children.

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Introduction

Mental retardation (MR) is not a disease. It is a condition of mental deficiency, a state of incomplete mental development of such a kind and degree that the individual is incapable of adapting himself to the normal environment of his fellows in such a way as to maintain existence independently of supervision, control or external support (Tredgold, 1937).

Mental retardation is a term used when a person has certain limitations in mental functioning and in skills such as communicating, taking care of him or herself, and social skills. These limitations will cause a child to learn and develop more slowly than a typical child. Children with mental retardation may take longer to learn to speak, walk, and take care of their personal needs such as dressing or eating. They are likely to have trouble learning in school. The performance and behavior of a normal person or even a mentally retarded person is never dependent only on his or her intellectual capacity, but on many other factors like emotional maturity, education, training and the social and cultural environment.

Scientific research has shown that by providing the right kind of support and services, it is possible to ensure that those with mental retardation can live healthy and relatively independent lives. These services comprise many areas such as health care, early intervention, education, vocational training, and so on. As citizens of a civilized society, it is the right of people with mental retardation to lead their lives with respect and dignity. To achieve these aims, professionals, parents, governmental and nongovernmental organizations, and society as a whole have to work together. Parents play a crucial role in the growth and development of their children, because children spend most of their time with their parents and they imitate and learn from them. So, for the normal development and social competence, parenting is very important.

Skinner's theory of operant conditioning, demonstrates that the environment has a great influence on learning and behavior. Reinforcement has proven to be a powerful tool in developing, shaping and control of behavior.

Bandura's social learning theory believes that people acquire a wide range of behaviors, thoughts and feelings by observing others' behaviour and these observations play an important role in life

long learning. In spite of the mental deficiency children observe and imitate their family members more so parents.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory emphasizes environmental context for the development of the child. Microsystem i.e. parents, siblings and family members influence most and have direct interactions with social agents and have long term effect on the child. Hence parents are the most important people in the lives of their children, giving love, care and belongingness.

Parents are the most important part of the child's social network. Parents are members of the child's first environment home, are the most significant people during early formative years. When a special child is born in the family, the parents are shocked. Their denial of the situation, frustration arising out of various adjustments the parents have to make in the caring of their child and the feeling of inefficiency in coping with the situation has its impact on the social adjustment of the child. The high aspirations which the parents have about the well being of their children are shattered when they find out about the child's disability. They do not sustain prolonged efforts for development of compensatory skills of the child. Results of interventions for the handicapped child are not seen immediately and the parents lose their faith even further.

Mentally retarded children at homes are lifelong stressors for parents. But proper handling and treatment can make them to live self sufficiently. The interactions of parents with their children with disabilities can have a profound impact on the development and progress of the child. It is widely assumed that involving parents will effect changes in the child directly as a result of enhancing parental management of skills or indirectly improving family functioning.

Some advantages to involve parents are: i) Economical ii) Generalization and maintenance iii) Prevention of future problems and iv) Effectiveness of training

Parent's participation is expected to benefit the child, parent and family and society at large. The different way of viewing parent involvement, however is that in reducing stress, increasing family coping and improving relationships within the family. The methods of involving parents could be: i) Parent training programs ii) Encouraging formation of parent groups iii) Involving parents in the training programs and iv) Increase participation of parents in the education system.

There are so many factors that may influence the parental involvement in education and expectations like degree of disability of children, associated handicap with mental retardation, at identification, age at admission to special schools, years of schooling, family size, family type, socio-economic status, education of parents, occupation of parents etc. So, there is a need to know, to understand the extent of involvement and expectations of parents in the training, education of mentally challenged children.

Influence of the Family on Children

As the mental retardation child grows up and masters activities of daily living, they need to be imparted education like other children. Going to school is essential for them to learn not only academic skills but also discipline, social/interactional skills, and practical skills for community living. To ensure their optimum development and well-being some of the common and important contributions of the family are:

- Feeling of security from being a member of a stable group.
- People children can rely on to meet their needs- physical and psychological.
- Guidance and help in learning skills- motor, verbal and social.
- Stimulation of their abilities to achieve success in school and in social life.
- Aid in setting aspiration suited to their interests and attitudes.
- Sources of companionship until old enough to find companions outside the home or when outside companionship is not available.

Involvement in Security and Positive Attitude

Family is the foremost non formal agency in the rehabilitation process of the special children. Parents should give the child a positive feeling of security. The child should make to feel that he is loved and wanted by his family. The child should be free from fear and aggressiveness regarding his handicapped condition. Parents should be oriented to have optimistic views about the development of the child. The attitude towards the child with special needs has to be positive. Parents should neither be over indulgent or a hard disciplinarian. For example, parents must permit their special child extra favours, excuse him for his duties, pick up things he drops etc. This is poor training and will accentuate his dissimilarities from his playmates. But life will be more pleasant for the child and his family if the parents treat him as a perfectly normal youngster

as indeed he is capable of being. Let him realize that he too has responsibilities, look after his young things, his books and clothes etc. The sooner a child learns to meet his daily needs the better equipped he will be to meet the daily needs of later life.

Importance of Parental and Community Involvement

Rehabilitation of a special child should begin from his family. Parents should be able to appreciate their role in assisting to child to get ready for his total rehabilitation. Some of the special children may require special help throughout the time they are at school or college because of the severity of their condition but some may need special assistance temporarily. Thus it is mandatory that every parent of a special child involves himself with child's education right from very beginning. The child has to become an integral part of the community. Unless the society accept the child with his strength and weaknesses total rehabilitation is not possible. The ultimate aim of the education of the special children should be to ensure that the child becomes a responsible independent member of the society.

Involving Parents and Community in Educational Programme

Some researcher have suggested that parents inaccurate estimations of their children's capacities may negatively influence children's development by limiting parents ability to create an optimally challenging environment (Miller, 1986). Thus, parents should know what to expect from the child and how they can involve themselves in providing the assistance in helping their children availing special education and to learn adaptive skills. Parents and family members are critical partners, along with school district personnel in the training and education of their children.

Like the general education, it is known that the communication between the teacher and parents is also important. The two parties can share their methods and programmes and revise the developmental progress of the child, thus increasing the likelihood of success. Parents provide essential information to teachers and administrators play an important role in decisions making for the betterment of their children and can be a key to supporting high expectations for their children during their school years. Parent's participation and involvement in the education, and training of child increases hopes of improvements for the child and increases the possibilities for functional ability, mobility, self care and social skills.

Research has shown that the best place for children with mental retardation to grow in is their own families, where they can be nurtured with appropriate stimulation. Therefore, parents should play a significant role in educational programme for the disabled children. Education begins in the cradle and continues through life. Opportunities should be provided at home to the special child even before he goes to school. Parents must accept their responsibilities in making up of the child. Parents are carried by some misconceptions which are necessarily to be overcome through right type of educational programme.

- Parents think that the special child is not going to be a productive member of the family or society. This generates in them a feeling that the investment on the special child would go waste.
- It is true that these children should get all possible help from various agencies for their upliftment but at the same time the contribution of the parents is also expected for their education.

Responsibilities of Parents in Education of Mentally Retarded Children

- Participate as member of the individualized educational meeting programmes (IEP)
- Cooperate with the school and other professionals to determine IEP goals and objectives for the child.
- Accept responsibility for assisting in the implementation of IEP goals and objectives.
- Provide feedback and suggestions about the instructions and services being provided.
- Train a child in home environment to meet his educational needs.
- Provide ideas for parental education programmes designed to assist parents to meet the needs of the special children.

Training in Self-help, Social and Practical Skills

Normal children learn the skills of daily living such as feeding, dressing, toilet training, and social skills such as playing, mixing, and interacting with others easily, by watching others and with some adult guidance and teaching. But children with mental retardation often do not learn these skills on their own. Through systematic efforts and using proper techniques, it is possible to teach and train them in these skills.

In teaching and training of skills the role of the parents should be.

- Paying attention, praising the child and giving some material reward such as sweets, candies or toys whenever the child shows desirable behaviour or makes an attempt to learn, increases the child's motivation to learn appropriate and new behaviour.
- Showing the child how a particular activity is done and encouraging the child to initiate the activity is a powerful method of teaching new behaviour. This is better than just orally telling or instructing the child.
- Teaching the simplified version of a complex activity first and then gradually making it more and more complex at a pace comfortable to the child
- An activity, such as dressing skills, can be broken up into several small, sequential steps. The child can be taught these skills step-by-step. Very often, back-chaining or teaching the last step first and then going backwards is more effective
- If the child cannot learn by modelling, he or she can be taught the activity by holding hands and showing them how the task is done. After many such repetitions, the physical guidance can be slowly withdrawn so that the child learns to do the task independently.

Role in Teaching Self help Skills

These are the survival skills important for the self independency of the child. These are the abilities which enable the disabled child to carry on his daily routine without assistance or with minimum assistance. Development of these abilities instils confidence in the child for his main streaming with normal children. Daily living skills ought to be taught by the family. Parents should not hesitate to permit their special child to use electric appliances like gas, iron etc. Without these experiences the life of the child would be incomplete. Similarly combing of hair, changing of clothes etc. are skills that can be learnt best in the natural rhythms of life in the house, and the mother is the best teacher to teach skills to a child with mental retardation. Orientation needs to be given to the parents, to teach these basic skills to the special child using appropriate strategies like task analysis.

Parents Teacher Interaction

Parents have the first right to know what programme is followed for their child. They need to be associated with the teacher in planning the skill development programme for their children. Parent teacher meeting should be conducted often.

The issues to be discussed are:

- To know the needs of the parents.
- To know the expectation of the parents from the child and school.
- To make the parents aware of the condition of the child- cause and prognosis and its implication.
- To make the parents aware of the development characteristics of their child.
- To help them have realistic expectations.

To get them involved with school programmes.

The parent teacher association has to become a vital social agency. The parents of both the handicapped and non handicapped children can become the agents for changing the attitude of the public towards the special children.

Contribution of the Community

Very often, services tend to be concentrated in well-to-do urban localities. To overcome this lop-sided approach, a community orientation is necessary, so that services are available to large sections of society in their own vicinity. No programme is likely to succeed without community involvement and participation. Through involvement in child programmes, parents organisations, opinions and public policies, support by the extended family, utilisation of professional services, providing financial support to the parents, the participation of community can be increased social support from the community gives emotional support and encourages a feeling of normalcy in the child and his parents.

The community may contribute in the following areas

- Starting vocational training programmes by providing appropriate training according to their disability
- Social rehabilitation through attitude change towards disability.
- Organising public awareness programmes.
- Setting up special schools.

- Sponsoring a special child's education and providing scholarship to deserving students with disability.
- Organising community based recreational activities for these children.
- Sponsoring of organising screening and identification camps.
- Serving as volunteers in special schools.

Conclusion

It is widely assumed that involving parents will effect changes in the child directly as a result of enhancing parental management skills or indirectly improving family functioning through support and counseling. The key to understanding the current situation of children with intellectual disabilities is that general attitudes and approaches towards disability, including intellectual disability, are in transition. Central to this transition is a shift from models based on segregation in institutions to ones that give priority to community-based living and social inclusion. This has implications for health care services and for the whole range of social and educational services, and, in the most far-reaching of ways, for how people with disabilities, and particularly children and their families, live their lives.

There is a growing research based consensus that institutionalization is an active source of harm and that institutions simply do not provide a suitable environment for any child to grow up, as they foster inhumane, dehumanizing, coercive and abusive forms of experience that systematically harm physical and mental health and can result in reduced life expectancy, or in the worst cases, in early death. Research into the process of deinstitutionalization has shown clearly that outcomes are better overall in the community than in institutional care.

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