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New Research Shows Importance of Promoting Better Understanding and Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in the Classroom

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Developments in Children's Evaluations of and Reasoning About Disability-Related Accommodations

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According to the National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities, approximately 1 in 6 children in the United States have developmental disabilities which include physical, learning, language or behavior-related disabilities. Students with disabilities often receive accommodations (how students access and learn the same content as their classmates) at school, but teachers rarely explain them to typically-developing classmates. Children with disabilities are increasingly included in general education classrooms alongside typically-developing classmates. Accommodations such as an adult helper to work one-on-one with the student, preferential seating, or extra time to navigate the school between classes ensure the success of many children with disabilities in these settings. When teachers do not discuss accommodations or their purpose with typically-developing classmates, those classmates may have to make sense of the accommodations themselves.

The current study examined how five to nine-year-olds evaluate children with disabilities who engage in accommodation-related behavior (e.g., taking extra time on tests/assignments, going to lunch/recess early, playing games differently). The study included 122 children ranging from 5- to 9- years (61 males; 61 females) who lived in Tennessee or had recently moved from Tennessee to another state in the United States. The majority of the participants were white with upper-middle-class backgrounds (87.7%), followed by Asian/Asian American (9.8%), Hispanic or Latino (4.1%), Black/African American (3.3%), and Native American (.8%). (These categories were not mutually exclusive; parents could select more than one.) Most parents reported that their highest level of education was a master's degree (36.9%). An experimenter showed children a slideshow where several characters with either physical (walking) or cognitive (learning) disabilities engaged in physical accommodations (e.g., goes outside to recess first) or cognitive accommodations (e.g., has an adult helper in class). Participants were asked to evaluate the fairness of these accommodations, and to provide their explanations for why characters engaged in these accommodation-related behaviors.

The findings showed that with increasing age, children evaluated disability-related accommodations as increasingly fair. Older children also demonstrated greater understanding of how specific accommodations help to address specific needs, which might account for why they judged accommodations as fairer. The research was featured in a new *Child Development* article with authors from Vanderbilt University, in the United States.

These findings may encourage teachers, parents, and service providers to discuss the ways that accommodations address the needs of persons with disabilities. The Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) had the opportunity to speak with lead author Dr. Nicolette G. Granata to learn more about the research.

SRCD: Can you please provide a brief overview of the study?

Dr. Granata: In this study, we investigated how young children, 5-9-years-old, evaluate the fairness of and explain accommodations that are common in elementary school classrooms, such as playing games or sports differently, going to recess or lunch first, or receiving extra help in the classroom. Children reasoned about other children with either physical (walking) or cognitive (learning disabilities) engaging in walking-related (e.g., playing soccer with one's hands) or learning-related classroom accommodations (e.g., having an adult helper with classwork), and were asked to imagine that they were a part of this classroom, too. Children first provided their reasoning for why these other children in the hypothetical classroom may have engaged in these behaviors and then evaluated whether these behaviors were fair or not, on a scale from "very unfair" to "very fair". We were interested in children's evaluations of the accommodation-related behaviors, their explanations for the behaviors, and the associations between their evaluations and reasoning.

SRCD: Did you learn anything that surprised you?

Dr. Granata: Absolutely! Regardless of age, children who accounted for accommodation-related behaviors (like going to recess first) in terms of addressing the *needs* of children with disabilities (versus their wants or desires), evaluated that behavior as more fair. We were surprised that this was the case whether children could articulate exactly *why* a certain character with a disability needed an accommodation ("he needs to go outside first because he can't walk as well and it takes him longer than other kids"), *or,* simply understood that a need was present ("because he needs to"). Why does this matter? Because it means that children may

not need to know all the details about a particular disability or accommodation to demonstrate flexibility, understanding, and acceptance.

SRCD: Can you please explain how this research might be helpful for teachers, parents and administrators?

Dr. Granata: My sense of why many teachers feel wary to formally discuss disability in the classroom is because they fear that children won't understand the nuances of the many types of disabilities their classmates may have, or that children might resent their classmates for having certain accommodations, or that pointing out a disability might lead to children treating the disabled classmate negatively. This study demonstrates that even young children generally felt neutral about the fairness of unexplained accommodations for classmates with disabilities, and children who were older or who expressed an understanding that accommodations addressed people's needs generally evaluated the accommodations as fair. Thus, this study demonstrates to teachers, parents, and administrators that it might be worthwhile to begin these discussions in elementary school, emphasizing how accommodations work to address the unique needs of persons with disabilities. Children are likely noticing disabilities and accommodations anyway, and are likely curious about the reasons for accommodations, so why not help guide children with accurate and empathic information?

SRCD: Can you please address some of the research limitations?

Dr. Granata: Some limitations of our study were that disabilities were only described to children ("He walks differently") rather than visually depicted, meaning children may have interpreted the severity of any given disability differently. This was an intentional methodological decision, but this is of course not how most children will witness persons with disabilities in the real-world. As well, exploratory analyses in our study revealed that children who more often interacted with persons with disabilities evaluated accommodations more fairly; because our sample was largely middle to upper-middle class, perhaps children in our study had more exposure to accommodations and other disability-related services than participants from lower income communities, leading to their generally neutral or positive evaluations of the fairness of accommodations. We need to know more about how children in different communities evaluate and reason about the fairness of disability accommodations.

SRCD: What's next in this field of research?

Dr. Granata: Future research should continue to explore how children evaluate and reason about the fairness of accommodations for people with disabilities in more diverse samples, as well as more specifically examine how children's evaluations of accommodations vary along with what they are taught in school – both explicitly and implicitly. Children's concepts of disabled persons continue to be understudied when compared to their concepts of other minority groups; we encourage continued study in this field in order to build a more inclusive and accepting society for those with differences throughout the lifespan.

Summarized from an article in *Child Development*, "Developments in Children's Evaluations of and Reasoning about Disability-Related Accommodations," Granata, N., Bacchus, C., Leguizamon, M., and Lane, J.D. (Vanderbilt University). Copyright 2025 The Society for Research in Child Development. All rights reserved.