

EXPERT COLUMN

Children with Disabilities have Rights

IT IS OUR MORAL DUTY TO RESPECT AND SUPPORT THEM

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There are children amidst us who cannot see, hear, move or function the way the majority of the peer group is capable of. Some may have an identifiable problem that is responsible for diminished or altered functioning. For example, physical defects in the eye, ear or hands and legs can interfere with the functioning of those organs. The physical defects are also called impairment. In some instances, we may not be able to identify what the impairment is but the child is unable to function as expected of his or her age. For example, there are children who have intellectual disabilities and other developmental issues (e.g. autism, dyslexia) though there is no identifiable impairment in the brain or elsewhere.

According to the World Health Organization, about 15% of the world's population lives with some form of disability, of whom 2-4% experience significant difficulties in functioning. As per the last census, there are 21 people with disabilities for every 1000 in our country. Most of the persons with disabilities are at school-going age but very few get to go to school. The situation is very grim for children with developmental disabilities and within this category, intellectual disability, autism, and dyslexia.

The situation of limited opportunities is not always because of disability conditions. Societal attitudes and stigma also play a role in limiting the participation of persons with disabilities in the community. For example, a child with autism wishes to go to school but may not get an opportunity because schools and communities are not ready to give admission. Or, even if the child is admitted, there may not be

adequate support to sustain the child in the mainstream. As a result,

many children with disabilities, especially those with developmental disabilities like autism, dyslexia and intellectual disability drop from mainstream education, social activities and occupation. And, it will seriously impair their quality of life.

There are very good policies to address the needs of persons with disabilities. One of them is the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (see, <https://disabilityaffairs.gov.in/content/page/acts.php> for more details). However, policies are effectively translated into action only when the large majority (that is, those without disabilities) develop a positive mindset to recognize the rights of people with disabilities. It may entail being sensitive to the special needs and adopting an empathetic (not a sympathetic) stance towards persons with disabilities. What is a better time than now to inculcate that attitude!

As the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed in 1992 to annually observe 3rd December as the International Day of Disabled Persons, let us resolve to include persons with disabilities in every aspect of political, social, economic and cultural life that we all enjoy and aspire for. But, most importantly, we need to understand that every person will have some abilities no matter what the disability is. And, it is our moral duty to recognize and strengthen those abilities.

