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## **A systematic review of disability awareness interventions for children and youth**

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### **Abstract**

**Background/Rationale:** Children's lack of knowledge about disability can negatively impact their attitudes and behaviour toward people with disabilities. This is particularly concerning because the majority of children with disabilities attend integrated classrooms and are at an increased risk for social exclusion and bullying. Therefore, it is critical to increase children's knowledge of disabilities to help improve social inclusion within schools.

**Research Question:** What are the effective components of disability awareness interventions for children and youth?

**Methods & Analyses:** A systematic review of disability awareness interventions was conducted to assess the effective components of such interventions. Electronic searches were conducted using MEDLINE(OVID), Healthstar(OVID), EMBASE, Cochrane database, Cochrane Central Register of Controlled Trials(CENTRAL), PsychInfo, Science Citation Index and Scopus. The inclusion criteria included: (1) an intervention that aimed to raise awareness or social inclusion for people with disabilities; (2) involved school-age children and youth with the majority of the sample or average age between 6-18 years old; (3) include at least one quantifiable measurable outcome; and (4) published in a peer-reviewed journal.

**Results:** The successful interventions consisted of multiple components (such as movies, books, drama, interactive exercises, interaction with individuals with disabilities and simulations) and were often theoretically driven. Interventions had the greatest impact on children's attitudes and knowledge about disabilities, not necessarily their behaviours. Interventions that focused on disability in general were more successful with elementary school children, while interventions that focused on specific disabilities were more successful with high school students. Interventions that were not successful were often led by teachers who were not specifically trained to run the activities and /or were often reactive to existing issues rather than proactive.

**Conclusion:** Disability awareness interventions can successfully change children's attitudes and should include multiple components. The content of the intervention appears to be more important than the length in terms of having a positive impact on children's attitudes about disability.

**Relevance:** These findings are being used to further develop disability awareness interventions to help improve the social inclusion and participation of children with disabilities within mainstream classrooms.

## **Ashley Edwards**

Ashley is currently completing her post-graduate Bachelor of Social Work, Honours, at the University of Waterloo. Her field practicum is with Extend-a-Family Waterloo Region, working to support children and adults with disabilities and their families, through individual, family and community organizing. This past summer, as a Ward Family Summer Student Ashley worked with Dr. Sally Lindsay. On the Student Research day, Ashley won an award for the Participation and Inclusion Theme. Ashley is applying to one-year Masters of Social Work programs, where she hopes to continue to develop both practical and research skills.