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# **BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS**

1st International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference  
IMSC 2018 – May 26, 2018  
Tetova, Macedonia

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## SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN: FROM EXCLUSION TO INCLUSION

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### ABSTRACT

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**W**hen a child is born with some type of handicap or acquires one during childhood, many parents face various difficulties and seek answers to countless questions. "What is happening to my child?"; "Why is this happening to him/her and to our family?"; "How can I find the best treatment for him/her?"; "How should I behave towards my child?"; "Will my child be able to attend school, have social and emotional relations, will he/she be able to work?"; "Will my child reach old age?"; "What will happen to him/her when we're gone?" Many parents are burdened with their situation and may experience difficulties handling their child's handicap in an appropriate way. However, many of them will soon become experts for their children's condition. When working with special needs children, it is very important to understand that every child and every family is unique. As teachers, psychotherapists, doctors, nurses, etc., we must learn and understand everything we can about the child, and his/her handicap in order to better support, teach, treat and to make efforts for them. Parents will continue to love and accept their children just the way they are, which, of course, is the most important thing for them.

**Keywords:** children, handicap, family.

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### Introduction

Early childhood is the most critical period for the growth and development of an individual, because the experiences during this period will potentially influence his/her entire life. For every child, early childhood represents the basis for the learning process during his/her entire life, thus preventing any type of developmental disability is of crucial importance. For those children that are born with any type of handicap or disability, or that acquire one, it is of utter importance that the handicap/disability be identified and to begin with early intervention, with which the chances of reaching his/her maximum capacities will be improved.

Despite that the consciousness for these persons, especially for the handicapped or disabled children is growing in the expert, as well as the general public, nevertheless many children are left behind the margins of the health, social, educational and social

ISBN: 978-608-66191-0-7

IMSC-2018, May 26, 2018. Tetovo, Macedonia.

systems. They often face administrative, legal, legislative and other barriers. Furthermore, the societal stigma adds to the limitation of the much needed support, necessary for handling the developed difficulties.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child [1], as well as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [2], states that children with disabilities are entitled to enjoy the same rights as all other children. Each disabled child has the right to appropriate support, especially right to early intervention access and appropriate education. This enables to ensure better quality of life of the child and of the family, as well as to ensure a fuller and meaningful life during adulthood, as well.

#### Defining disability

Defining disability as a concept is very difficult, and for now, there is no consensus regarding the uniformity in terminology and definition. Moreover, there are certain difficulties in the measurement of disability, making it hard to reach uniform epidemiological data.

The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health of children and adolescents, defines disability not only as a biological or social state, but as interaction between the state of health, environmental factors and personal causes [3].

The Convention on the Rights of the Persons with Disabilities, defines the disabled persons as persons who during their life have physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments, who in interaction with the various everyday barriers, have difficulties in their entire and effective participation in society, in an equal manner, as all other individuals. Disabled persons can be affected by single or multiple impairments, therefore, of course, especially the latter, have a decreased chance for achieving a better quality of life.

The World Health Organization and the World Bank estimated that more than one billion people live with some type of disability, which represents around 15% of the entire world population. The precise prevalence, especially of disabled children, remains unconfirmed for now, due to the many definitions of the views, the uncoordinated methodologies of research and adapted instruments [4].

#### Early childhood and disability

Child development is a rapid process which goes through many rapid changes and transitions, during which the child, from complete dependence of the parent, should grow and develop into an independent individual. The capabilities and skills, as senso-

motor, cognitive, communicational, socio-emotional, develop in a way that first the simple skills are mastered, in order for the more complex skills to begin developing. The child is an active participant in these processes, which also depend on the environmental factors.

This especially applies to the disabled children that poverty, stigma and discrimination, insufficient or inappropriate child-parent interaction, system institutions with underdeveloped services, etc., can in many ways harm their psychophysical state. This, of course, will impair their quality of life during adulthood.

However, the manner in which the family of the special needs child will handle this issue is of vital importance. The fundamental need of every child is to feel loved. Parents should not feel guilty or ashamed about their child's condition, but they should raise their child just like any other child. It is important to bear in mind that in most children, the disability does not change the child fundamentally, but can change the way we view and behave towards it. Often, a family can live in social isolation due to the stigma and negative reactions from others. Moreover, the financial burden with which a family may face in securing various interventions necessary for the improvement of the child's quality of life should not be overlooked. Due to all of these, the support and education of the entire family is a necessary part of the therapy process.

A potential problem in the development of the special needs child, can, of course, be the poor quality of peer interpersonal relations. It is often that special needs children have poor social contact, mostly due to the lack of information of the peers regarding his/her condition, the non-acceptance or ignoring of someone different than them, fear of the unknown, inability to interact, etc. During the period of development, peer interaction is of great importance, because peers can offer comfort, fun, play, games, education, emotions, in a way that adults cannot. Every opportunity for social contact should be encouraged and realized, this inclusion of special needs children in pre-school and school activities is part of the therapeutic process, as well.

#### Inclusion of children with special needs

Special needs children are often faced with different forms of exclusion, which affect them in various ways and levels, and this in turn is due depends on the type of their disability, sex, age, place of living, social opportunities, etc. Little will change in the lives of the special needs children if the way they are treated by others does not improve. Parents, especially health and educational personnel, must be appropriately informed about working with special needs children, and the most crucial thing to

understand is that these children and their families have the same needs as others, which need to be met with target services in specialized centers.

Of course, the most important thing to do first is to perform an early evaluation and identification, in order to start early intervention and to continue the monitoring and evaluation. The parents and the expert team should be in continuous open communication and exchange of information on the progress and difficulties which arise in the therapeutic or educational process. In addition to what the system offers, every individual can contribute a lot in the acceptance of these children, alleviating their everyday life, and destigmatizing them.

Often, access to the health system for these children and their families can be particularly difficult. A lot of times due to lack of appropriate training of the medical personnel for offering services to children with special needs, by the local centers in their place of living, these children are sent to the higher health care centers. This practice is common even for simple health conditions. Often, this happens due to the misconception that these children are harder to treat or that they always have need of specialized care. This, of course, is a financial burden for the family, requires absence from work or school, physical and emotional strain for the child, and the family as well. Parents that are caretakers of these children for years and decades are often left without help for their transport, especially for long distances. Because of these reasons, parents are not able to meet their children's needs.

During the last years, there is a lot of attention focused on the education of these children. Every special needs child has the right to education. The educational process is the path that will lead the child into complete participation in society. This especially applies to special needs children that are often excluded from education. Education has a positive potential of influencing the health of the children, which of course, will influence their capability to fight for themselves, to handle the continuous health conditions and the complex medical and social system during childhood and later in life. Inclusion of special needs children is very important for allowing them to continue living with their families and developing interactions in their neighborhoods, instead of getting their education in a school far away from home. The educational process should be adapted to the individual needs of the child, in order to reach his/her maximal capacities. This will ensure that the children will have better chances of becoming productive members of the society.

## Conclusion

Usually, the special needs child carries many challenges for himself/herself, for everyone around him/her, society, the state, etc. Of course, family members are concerned about the future of their child and will do anything in their power to help as much as they can. With appropriate information and knowledge, family members will support each other and can become the best representatives of their child's rights. Children with special needs today are visible in society. They attend school, associate with their peers, participate in social activities, etc. Various barriers and obstacles for their complete integration in society still exist, but diversity is much more appreciated and fear from it is decreasing. Of course, this represents an evolution in the attitudes and promotion of a more humane, more compassionate and open world. Special needs children remind us of the need for this manner of attitude from the world toward them, on a daily basis.

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