

## PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDREN WITH MENTAL DISABILITIES

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### Abstract

This article aims to shed light on the psychological and social characteristics of children with mental disabilities and the extent to which these characteristics affect their social adaptation to the environment around them. Empirical and analytical studies and research in this field have been highlighted, discussed, and analyzed that came up with evidence and facts regarding this children category. The article is one of the important articles and studies shedding light on the importance of addressing psychological and social characteristics and their impact on the development of various skills for the category of mental disabilities, which would further enhance their social, cognitive, academic, and educational, functional and life skills, and communication skills. Modern educational studies and research concerning this category of children and the educational methods suitable for them were searched for. The fields of research included: the category of children with mental disabilities, their psychological and social characteristics, and the impact of these characteristics on social and emotional needs and social adjustment. A full bulletin has been prepared that includes the most important studies that dealt with the psychological and social characteristics of mentally disabled children, ways of teaching them, and their most important results and tools. In this, those responsible can benefit from them in teaching the category of mentally disabled children. The researcher concluded that the psychological and social characteristics of the category of children with mental disabilities have a significant and clear impact on their acquisition of various skills: academic, life, social, and behavioral skills. In light of this, it is very important to develop the knowledge of teachers and specialists dealing with this category regarding these characteristics. This would play an important role in developing the social-emotional learning for this category, providing them with various skills and discharging them towards a dignified life and a better future.

**Key words:** Children With Mental Disabilities, Characteristics, Psychological Characteristics, Social Characteristics.

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## Introduction

Mental disabilities are considered among the oldest major disabilities that human societies have ever known and given special care for. It provides clear evidence that the person has weak mental abilities that is noticeable, as well as, a deficit in his/her adaptive behavior and social maturity. Like other disabilities, mental disabilities may come alone or be accompanied by other physical, visual, auditory, and motor disabilities. In turn, this causes several unique problems that require this person with mental disabilities to join schools and programs that are specifically directed to such cases.

One of the most important disability groups that needs training programs is the category of children to develop skills that help them learn and address problems resulting from mental disabilities. This is because children are characterized by a set of psychological, social, mental, and cognitive characteristics that play an important role in diagnosing and teaching them and acquiring various skills (Abdullah, 2004) (Person, 2014).

The diversity of these characteristics distinguishes them from other individuals with other kinds of disabilities and makes them a heterogeneous group that requires intervention to be provided with special education services that support them academically, socially, educationally, and in terms of training. It's extremely important to identify the characteristics of children with mental disabilities, as this would provide specialized educators and specialists with important information about aspects of development in many academic, physical, social, emotional, and mental areas. This, in turn, helps develop and design school curricula and therapeutic programs necessary to prepare mentally disabled people for life (Al-Rusan, 2008).

This article deals with the psychological and social characteristics of children with mental disabilities, and the role of these characteristics in developing their skills helping them to integrate into the teaching process, and alleviating their suffering. It also searches about how these characteristics provide children with the opportunity to fill part of the gaps left by disability and enable them to improve their adaptive performance in various life skills. Therefore, the current study aims to review literature that has investigated the psychological and social characteristics of children with mental disabilities. This is to provide the necessary data to show the importance of being aware of these characteristics and develop the performance of this category by employing the characteristics and highlighting how effective they are in developing their various skills. This is done by visiting schools that are concerned with children with mental disabilities. It was clear that most of these schools lack the necessary knowledge about these characteristics and their importance in the process of teaching the category of mental disability. Hence the idea of the article is to reveal the importance of recognizing such characteristics when teaching children with mental disabilities and developing their various abilities.

Great challenges are witnessed in the field of mental disabilities from finding strategies and methods of learning and dealing with children to providing this group with the basic skills necessary for their social adaptation. In light of these challenges, it was important for people who hold the responsibility of this category to be aware of their distinctive characteristics so they integrate them and find appropriate methods to address them (Al-Imam, 2006).

This category of children is in the greatest need of training programs to develop skills that help them learn and address the problems resulting from their mental disability. This category is characterized by a set of mental and cognitive features, foremost of which is slow mental development, poor attention, memory deficits, cognitive deficits, poor thinking ability, and lack of academic and motivation skills (Abdullah, 2004), (person, 2014).

Hallahan and Kaufman (2008) pointed out that children with mental disabilities, regardless of the severity of their disability, need to learn some academic, life, professional

and other skills to help them become independent and integrate properly into their society. Among the most important of these skills are life skills as their role is not limited to the material life only, but they also matter to emotional issues that enable individuals with disabilities to interact with others.

To succeed in educating this group, we must be aware of their emotional, social, psychological, behavioral, sentimental, and academic characteristics. This aims at knowing how to diagnose them and building intervention programs appropriate to each student's current individual level. Towards the success of this process, we, as professionals, educators, diagnosticians, and teachers, have to deal with children with mental disabilities comprehensively and integrally since the diagnosis of the case (Arab Council for Childhood and Development, 2018).

### **Children with Mental Disabilities**

Children with mental disabilities are identified, according to the American Assembly for Mental Retardation, as children with substantive underperformance in current functioning that is characterized by a moderate functional mental performance. This performance is associated with deficiencies in two or more areas of adaptive skills, such as communication and personal care, domestic life and social skills and utilization of community sources, autonomy, health, safety, and functional academic aspects of leisure, work, life, and independence skills. This underperformance is demonstrated before the age of 18 (AAMR, 2002).

**The American Psychiatric Association APA** mentioned that mental disabilities carry underlying disorders in certain aspects of personal competence manifested through low performance in cognitive abilities with a clear reduction in consensual skills. This appears in one or more of the following areas: communication, self-care, social skills, academic achievement, self-orientation, autonomy, work, and access to services available in society (Zeinab & Choucair, 2005).

#### **Social Definitions of Mental Disability**

It is defined from a social perspective in the light of the child's social competence, as he/she is socially and professionally incompetent compared to his/her normal peers. They are characterized by a clear lack of behavioral and functional performance. This perspective is based on the use of diverse social metrics that measure an individual's adaptation to society and their ability to adapt to the social requirements expected of their peers (Adel & Abdullah, 2011).

### **Categories of Mental Disability**

- **Simple Mental Disability Category:** this category represents the majority of mentally disabled to a percentage reaching about 85%. The IQ scores of those in this category range from 55-70, and they are called the learnable category. They can learn calculations, reading, and writing skills. They are also biologically capable of marrying, establishing families, and working.

- **Middle Mental Disability Category:** it represents 10% of the total mentally disabled with IQs ranging from 40-55 and they are called the trainable category. They are capable to take care of themselves and make a living by practicing some simple skills and getting a simple job.

- **Severe Mental Disability Category:** this category represents about 3-4% of mentally disabled with IQs ranging from 25-40. They are unable to learn or work, but they can train for autonomous skills like eating and self-care. They often need supervision and following-up by adults or family, and that is why they are called codependents.

• **Innermost Mental Disability Category:** which represents 1-2% of the total mentally disabled with IQs reaching 25 or less. They are unable to learn and work, or even capable of training on dependency skills. Consequently, they need full care in specialized rehabilitation homes and under medical, psychological, and social supervision (Sadock & Sadock, 2000).

### **The characteristic**

It is any genetic, acquired, cognitive, emotional, or social trait, characteristic, or feature of relative permanence, in which individuals may differ and be distinguished from one another (Samer, 2003).

### **Psychological characteristics**

It is a set of personal characteristics or traits that enjoy a degree of permanence. It manifests through the behavior of the individual in different situations and includes emotional, social, mental, and physical aspects (Mahmoud, 2016), (Weiten & Margaret, 1994).

### **Social characteristics**

It is a set of social phenomena that distinguish an individual or a group of individuals, which reflect and distinguish an individual's performance in different social situations. Social characteristics are one of the characteristics of personality as they distinguish individuals from each other, and it is a very important feature of an individual's integration into society (Al-Quraiti, 2014).

Scientists did not agree on a comprehensive and acceptable definition of the phenomenon of mental disability, because it is a phenomenon that combines the interest of many fields of science: psychology, sociology, medicine, and law. Those interested in the medical aspect focus on the evolution of the individual's development and the causes that led to the disability, and those interested in mental capacity depend on IQ. On the other hand, those interested in the social aspect depend on the extent to which the individual succeeds or fails in social requirements, while those interested in the educational aspects depend on the individual's ability to learn (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2006).

The most common and acceptable definition of mental disability is the American Association on Mental Retardation AAMR definition. The definition states that mental disability is a deficiency in several aspects of an individual's performance under the age of 18, where mental abilities appear to be manifestly lower than average intelligence and are accompanied by apparent deficiencies in two or more manifestations of adaptive behavior (AAMR, 2002).

Because of this difference, identifying the general characteristics and features of children with mental disabilities, especially psychosocial and social features, is very important and helps parents and specialists to provide the best psychological, educational, and social services for this category (Boualiz, 2000).

One of the most important characteristics is the psychological ones as children with mental disabilities are characterized by emotional imbalance, instability and calm, vulnerability, sometimes slow reaction, excess movement, and aggressive behavior. They are less able to withstand anxiety and frustration (Drew, Hardman, & Logan, 1996).

In addition, they suffer from some emotional and social problems, because of the way these children are treated in different social situations, where they are called retarded, stupid, and crazy. Many studies have suggested that children with mental disabilities have a

negative sense of themselves and a weakened self-perception due to their poor abilities (Al-Rusan, 2013).

### **Children with mental disabilities are more likely to have interactional and emotional disorders due to**

- 1) The psychosocial pressures on children due to ill-treatment, and neglect from home and society.
- 2) The psychological and social stress the family is subjected to.
- 3) The decrease in their mental abilities (Richardson, Kaller & Katy, 1996).

In addition, children with mental disabilities are marked by social characteristics that distinguish them from others. Children with mental disabilities are distinct by poor social adaptability, lack of tendencies and attention, lack of responsibility, and low self-perception associated with their experiences of failure. Children with mental disabilities are also marked by delays in social maturity, the inability to rely on themselves or make decisions, and the need for direct supervision. They also show non-adaptive behaviors, such as aggression, antisocial, rebellious, withdrawal, skeptical, and stereotypical behaviors (Al-Rusan, 2011), (Heward & Orlankey, 1992).

Several studies have been conducted on the subject where Ekin, Cagiltay & Karasu (2018) study examined the teaching of the social concepts for children with a mental disabilities using smart games. Researchers used the semi-pilot approach and designed a topic on the computer to determine the impact of play on social studies and applied it to the study sample consisting of three children with mental disabilities. The results of the study indicated that there are positive effects of smart games in teaching the concepts of social studies to children with multiple mental disabilities and developing their social and academic skills.

Another study by Hanafi (2016) aimed at knowing the impact of social characteristics on children with simple mental disabilities to acquire social life skills. The study used the pilot approach, and the study sample consisted of 20 male children who are closely similar in their family conditions and physical characteristics. They are aged between 10 and 12 years old, and their IQ ranges between 50 and 70. The results of the study showed a clear positive correlation between the impact of social characteristics and children with mental disabilities acquiring daily and social life skills. The results also showed clear and significant progress in children's abilities to acquire these skills.

In the Abu al-Nasser Study (2013), the researcher sought to reveal the correlation between characteristics, social competence, and adaptive behavior in educable mentally disabled children. Also, to reveal differences in the level of characteristics, social efficiency, and adaptive behavior due to the gender variable. The study sample consisted of 50 educable mentally disabled children, (22) males and (28) females, aged between 10-12 years old. The study resulted in a statistically significant positive correlation between characteristics, social competence, and adaptive behavior in educable mentally disabled children. i.e., the higher the social efficiency of educable mentally disabled children the higher the degree of adaptive behavior. It also demonstrated that there are no differences in the level of social efficiency and adaptive behavior between males and females.

Abdul Karim (2009) undertook a study aimed at identifying the impact of a program based on active learning in social studies on the development of life skills of children with mental disabilities. The study sample consisted of 20 learnable children, and the researcher used the pilot curriculum where she prepared a set of tools to prepare a list of life skills for the disabled. The study resulted in the effectiveness of the proposed program for active learning in developing the life and social skills of children with mental disabilities, where statistically significant differences between pre-and post-applications were found.

Another study by (Claire et al., 2006) aimed at teaching children with mental disabilities safety skills and good decision-making using computer games. The study consisted of 32 children and used a series of computer games on the subject of fire and road. After they played the game, the test is verbally retested and then asked to restore these skills in the form of representative behavior. The results of the study found that (72%) of children with mental disabilities were able to generalize the previous steps in a behavioral form. The study also noted that the use of the computer is highly effective in making children with mental disabilities gain safety skills and make sound decisions.

Putnam et al. (2005) aimed to assess the impact of the collaboration skills guidance on mentally disabled students' social interaction behaviors, and the sample included 16 disabled children aged 9-14, with IQs around 55. They were divided into two, control and pilot groups, and the pilot group was given guidance on developing collaborative skills, and the feedback on performing those skills was used. The results of the study indicated an increase in the number of social interactions of the study sample children when trained according to the program used with a decrease in the incidence of their unwanted behaviors (Najdi, 2014).

In this research analysis, research studies have been presented in the field of psychosocial and social characteristics of the category of children with mental disabilities. After presenting and reading the results of previous studies, it was noted that most studies highlighted and demonstrated the important role played by psychosocial and social characteristics in educating a child with mental disabilities and increasing his or her adaptive behavior skills and thus, adopting him or her to the environment. The studies were shortened in a table showing their relationship with the different and specific fields of education of children with mental disabilities and focusing on the need to be familiar with them in their education. A variety of studies have been undertaken to examine the subjects and methods of adaptation impact, including those using the pilot approach, those using the semi-pilot approach, those using training programs, and those using the mixed approach in data analysis. Table 1 demonstrates this.

**Table (1)**

**Summary of studies on psychosocial and social characteristics of children with mental disabilities**

<b>Name of researcher and the year</b>	<b>Sample</b>	<b>Approach</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Focus</b>
Ekin & Cagiltay & Karasu (2018)	3 children with mental disabilities	Semi-pilot	Teaching social concepts	Social features and smart games
Hanafi (Mrs.) (2016)	20 male children with simple mental disability	Pilot approach	The impact of social characteristics on the acquisition of life skills	Social features and daily life skills
Abu al-Nasr Misbah (2013)	50 children (males and females) with mental disability	Pilot approach	The correlation between characteristics and social efficiency	Differences in the level of characteristics are due to the gender variable
Abdelkarim & Ghada (2009)	20 mentally disabled and learnable children	Pilot approach	Impact of an active learning-based program	Social studies and life skills

Claire et al. (2006)	32 children with mental disabilities	Semi-pilot	Teaching children safety skills	The use of computers in the teaching of skills
A study by Putnam et al. (2005)	16 disabled children	Pilot approach	The impact of collaboration skills guidance on social interaction behaviors	The use of feedback

## Conclusion

Based on previous studies and theoretical literature, the researchers emphasized the importance of psychosocial and social characteristics in dealing with children with mental disabilities and teaching them many skills, and in developing their emotional social learning. These characteristics promote life, social and psychological skills, and social adaptation. In addition, the researcher emphasizes the importance of characteristics and their impact on the different abilities of children with mental disabilities. Knowledge of these traits helps professionals, teachers, and specialists to adopt educational methods and strategies that help them develop and enhance their different skills.

This was reinforced by the Abu al-Nasser study (2016), which showed the positive correlation between adaptive characteristics and behavior and that the higher the degree of social efficiency and positive social characteristics of mentally disabled and educable children the higher the degree of adaptive behavior.

The researchers supports this conclusion that fits with the study of Ekin, Cagiltay & Karasu (2018) and emphasizes that it is very essential for educators of the category of children with mental disabilities to familiarize themselves with these characteristics. Also, to use them to provide better and more efficient therapeutic programs and increase adaptive behavior with the environment. The results of the studies showed the significant and positive impact of familiarity with these characteristics on the diagnosis and suitability of therapeutic programs and strategies for the category of mental disabilities to acquire different skills.

**The researchers summarizes** how the psychological and social characteristics of children with mental disabilities have a significant and obvious impact on their acquisition of different skills (academic, skillful, life, and social). In light of this, it is significant to ensure that teachers, specialists, and people who deal with this category are familiar with these characteristics. This is to develop this group's emotional and social learning and help them acquire different skills toward a dignified life and a better future.

## Recommendations

- A pilot study to examine the extent to which the educator of children with mental disabilities are familiar with psychosocial characteristics and their impact on the level of adaptive behavior.
- A study of the effectiveness or impact of psychosocial characteristics on the emotional social learning of people with mental disabilities from the educator's point of view.
  - Providing mentoring programs, seminars, and workshops for teachers and parents on the subject of psychosocial and social characteristics focusing on their outstanding importance in the rehabilitation and education of persons with mental disabilities.
  - The need for the Ministry of Education to take care of the development of the curricula and programs for children with mental disabilities, including all psychological, emotional, and social aspects.

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