

# Educating to reduce stigma

Emma Sutherland

## WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Stigma is the process of labelling someone as different, placing them into a separate group and stereotyping them based on characteristics of that 'group'.

We often make decisions using stigma, for example when we use preconceived ideas about a 'group', and potential past experiences to make often unconscious split second judgements which will impact our actions and comments. Stigma and experiences attached to it are different for every individual, however, there are consistent factors which are highlighted in research – specifically related to individuals with disability.



### “Master Status”

Research has found that those with a disability are often overshadowed by their impairment. Often when children are labelled and then diagnosed as having a disability, they are then somehow lost to awareness of that disability only. Children in particular often have everything they do viewed through the lens of their disability or impairment.

### “Sympathy Effect”

Society often has a presumption of normality, and when someone does not fit into that 'norm' they are often identified as victims, or less fortunate. Research has found that pity is an overriding factor in most experiences of people with a disability. This is particularly the case for children who experience disability, where often their parents are also pitied. Sympathy can often take the form of 'intended kindness', where people are 'trying to be nice' but are in the process separating and stigmatising.

### “You can't ask that”

Research has found that parents of children with disability are faced with numerous daily questions regarding their child's condition “what's wrong with your child?”, “what happened?”. Importantly these questions, when asked by adults, are noted as being invasive, negative and at times upsetting. Interestingly the same research found that when children ask these questions, this is not the case. Often parents of a child with a disability view these questions as expressing curiosity and with no ill intent.

## PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

Removing stigma is not an easy feat, however, there are 3 key things we can do to resist it:

- Allow children to ask questions, they are seeking knowledge. Questions like “why can't he see?” are an opportunity for you to educate and inform. Saying “you can't ask that” or encouraging children to “look away” simply enhances stigma
- View the child, not their disability or impairment – focus on their own abilities and capabilities based on them as an individual, not their impairment abilities
- Educate yourself – try to avoid making preconceived assumptions based on past experiences or stereotypes.

## FURTHER READING

- Green, S. E. (2007). "We're tired, not sad": Benefits and burdens of mothering a child with a disability. *Social Science & Medicine*, 64, 150-163. doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2006.08.025
- Green, S. (2003). "What do you mean 'what's wrong with her?'": Stigma and the lives of families of children with disabilities. *Social Science & Medicine*, 57, 1361-1374. doi:10.1016/S0277-9536(02)00511-7
- Ryan, S. (2005). 'People don't do odd, do they?' Mothers making sense of the reactions of others towards their learning disabled children in public places. *Children's Geographies*, 3, 291-305. doi:10.1080/14733280500352920
- <https://www.mother.ly/parenting/embracing-the-stigma-of-a-child-whos-labeled>

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Emma Sutherland**, Lecturer and Tutor, Department of Educational Studies.

Emma has a background in early childhood education with an interest in psychological development and the impact of stigma. Her master level thesis focused on parental experiences of stigma for those parents of a child with vision impairment.

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### FIND OUT MORE

Macquarie University NSW 2109 Australia  
[cls@mq.edu.au](mailto:cls@mq.edu.au)  
[mq.edu.au/research/child-learning](http://mq.edu.au/research/child-learning)

ABN 90 952 801 237  
CRICOS Provider 00002J



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