

Reconstructing misconceptions of parents about Intellectual Disability in community

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Abstract

Background: Deeply rooted misconceptions lead to shaping individual beliefs and attitudes. The misconceptions about persons with intellectual disabilities are largely accepted by people without any scientific logic or knowledge. Misconceptions have to be reconstructed so as to avoid negative thinking and stigmatization.

Aims: The purpose of the present study was designed to know the misconception of parents about intellectual disability in one of the suburban areas in Lucknow and evaluate the impact of the awareness program on community attitudes.

Method: Using the NIMH–GEMS Questionnaire, data were collected from families having intellectual disabilities.

Results: The findings reveal a high prevalence of misconceptions related to karma, fate, black magic, and the curability of intellectual disability. All participants (100%) believed intellectual disability is caused by karma, black magic, or eclipse, and 90% of them believed it is a punishment for parents. The awareness program demonstrated positive improvement in community understanding, highlighting the need for sustained interventions, parental training, and policy-level support.

KEYWORDS: Misconception, intellectual disability, parents, community.

Introduction

Intellectual disability is defined as a condition with significant limitations in both intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior, originating before age 22, requiring personalized support for improved life functioning (AAIDD, 2022). Despite advances in education, health care, and rehabilitation, misconceptions surrounding intellectual disability remain widespread

among parents in the community. These misconceptions often result in stigma, delayed intervention, denial, neglect, overprotection, and limited participation of children with intellectual disabilities in education.

Sarada (2023), in her study, explored parental superstitions towards persons with intellectual disability and found that 90% of parents believed that persons with intellectual disability can be cured. The majority of the parents have the opinion that intellectual disability is a mental illness and it can be cured by the medicines.

Hemn, Dagnan and Meyer (2017) opined that misconceptions that children with intellectual disabilities should be treated differently to protect them are shaped by the experiences of overprotection.

Common misconceptions about intellectual disability

Below is a selection of parental misconceptions that commonly held in the community.

Intellectual disability is due to fate or karma

This misconception exists despite clinical and research evidence that intellectual disability is due to limited intellectual functioning and impairment in adaptive behaviour, there is still a belief that it is fate or karma and is an outcome of disrespect for the spirit of God (Khan et al; 2011; Mishra et al., 2008).

Intellectual disability is an infectious disease

This misconception reflects a desire of people to avoid illness and results in a negative attitude (Thompson, 1982; Yusuf, R, 2025).

As person with intellectual disability grow older, he would gradually become normal

This misconception exists despite research evidence that it is a lifelong condition originating during the developmental period. While physical growth continues normally, cognitive functioning does not automatically catch up to typical developmental levels.

Intellectual disability is caused as an effect of lunar eclipse at the time of pregnancy or birth of the child

This belief is traditionally linked to a myth suggesting that harmful rays during an eclipse affect fetal brain development. However, this misconception has no scientific basis, as no harmful radiation is released during a lunar eclipse.

Misconceptions are passed from generation to generation, defined as the cultural expectations that society holds that, in turn, transform the attitude of people who believe in them (Setume, 2016).

These misconceptions are deeply rooted in culture, religion, and traditions and shape individual belief and attitude. Therefore, reconstructing parental misconceptions is a crucial step towards promoting inclusive development.

Objectives:

- To assess parental misconceptions towards intellectual disability in the community.
- To reassess parental misconception after intervention

Methodology

Research Design: A descriptive community-based survey followed by an awareness intervention

Sample: The sample for the present study was parents of Pataura village of Lucknow. Total 10 parents were taken as a sample. The respondents belonged to the age group of 20 to 45 years.

Tools Used:

- NIMH–GEMS Questionnaire was used to assess parental misconceptions. This questionnaire was developed by Dr D.K.Menon. Dr Reeta Peshawaria and Loraine Stephenson of NIEPID Secunderabad to gauge parental misconceptions in areas of general information, etiology (causes) and management.
- Survey form: it was developed by the researcher to illicit details about informants name, age sex, education, number of children, availability of UDID card etc

Data Collection Methods:

Prior to data collection, permission was sought from the sabhasad of the locality. A door-to-door survey was conducted to collect data.

Setting: The survey was conducted at every doorstep. For awareness training/intervention, all parents were asked to assemble in the community hall located in the community on the specified date and time.

Intervention/Awareness Program Description:

The intervention/awareness program involved interactive presentations of facts on all 30 misconceptions listed in tool used (GEM Questionnaire).

Results and Analysis:

Objective 1: To assess parental misconceptions towards intellectual disability in the community

- Results shows that all participants believed that intellectual disability was due to karma & black magic and 90% of them believed that it was a punishment for parents. Similarly, 70% of participants were of belief that medicine alone can cure intellectual disability and 50% of them believed marriage can cure it. The results of the study were analyzed and presented below in the table.

S. No.	Questions	YES		No		No reply	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
1	The problem of mental retardation is found only in children	6	60%	4	40%	0	0
2	Individual differences exist among mentally retarded persons	4	40%	5	50%	1	10%
3	Mental retardation is an Infectious disease	1	10%	8	80%	1	10%

4	Some of the persons with mental retardation can be as energetic as normal persons.	6	60%	3	30%	1	10%
5	Persons with mental retardation are able to manage themselves to some degree	0	0	10	100%	0	0
6	Mental retardation is mental illness	9	90%	0	0	1	10%
7	Persons with mental retardation can be fully cured	5	50%	5	50%	0	0

8	Most of the mentally retarded individuals can become capable of helping other persons in simple tasks	2	20%	8	80%	0	0
9	As the mentally retarded child grows up he would gradually become normal	6	60%	4	40%	0	0
10	Persons with mental retardation usually remain unhappy	3	30%	7	70%	0	0
11	The problem of mental retardation does not exist in our society	9	90%	1	10%	0	0
12	The condition of mental retardation may not always be transmitted from parents to children but can also be caused by factors during pregnancy, after birth, during childhood or adolescence.	7	70%	2	20%	1	10%
13	Mental retardation is due to fate or karma	10	100%	0	0	0	0
14	Children suffering from fits may not suffer from mental retardation	7	70%	3	30%	0	0

15	A child with mental retardation is born due to the sins of parents	9	90%	1	10%	0	0
16	Mentally retarded individuals are disobedient	9	90%	1	10%	0	0
17	Mental retardation is due to black magic or spells	10	100%	0	0	0	0
18	Mental retardation is caused as an effect to lunar eclipse at the time of pregnancy or birth of the child.	10	100%	0	0	0	0
19	Accidents, high fever, fits and causing brain damage in childhood may cause mental retardation	8	80%	2	20%	0	0
20	Malnutrition in pregnant women can cause mental retardation	4	40%	6	60%	0	0
21	Medicines only can cure mental retardation	7	70%	3	30%	0	0
22	The mentally retarded individuals require continuous training to learn various simple activities	5	50%	5	50%	0	0
23	Marriage can cure a person with mental retardation	9	90%	1	10%	0	0
24	Many of the persons with mental retardation are capable of looking after their basic needs	2	20%	8	80%	0	0
25	Traditional healers and poojaris can cure mentally retarded persons	9	90%	1	10%	0	0

26	The only solution to the problem of mentally retarded person is to put him in a residential school/hostel	5	50%	5	50%	0	0
27	Involvement of the parents is essential in the training of the child with mental retardation	5	50%	5	50%	0	0
28	Mentally retarded individuals will not improve without any amount of training	8	80%	2	20%	0	0
29	A mentally retarded individual can become as capable as a normal individual	1	10%	8	80%	1	10%
30	Love alone will not benefit a mentally retarded individual	6	60%	4	40%	0	0

Objective 2: To re-assess parental misconception after intervention.

Intervention was provided and there after parental misconceptions were reassessed. Post-test scores showed considerable improvement in parental awareness about intellectual disability, indicating that misconceptions reduced in all parents after the intervention.

S. No.	Pre-test %	Post-test %
1	20%	50%
2	26.60%	76.60%
3	30.00%	60%
4	33.30%	63.30%
5	26.60%	53.30%

6	53.30%	83.30%
7	26.60%	53.30%
8	53.30%	83.30%
9	56.60%	86.60%
10	26.60%	56.60%

Conclusion:

Persons with intellectual disabilities are indeed more vulnerable when it comes to the ableist misconceptions of society. Parental misconceptions about intellectual disability create barriers in their intervention. They face substantial challenges in terms of social inclusion, development, and wellbeing due to widespread myths and misconceptions about them. Many studies have shown that with right intervention parental misconceptions can be minimized (Mishra 2005, Yousuf, 2025, Sarda, 2023, Geeta, & Dineshan, 2024). Work needs to be done at community level to completely eradicate the erroneous misconceptions about people with intellectual disability so that they can get better opportunities to participate in intervention programs.

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