

Chapter 17

Realabilities: The Development of a Research– Based Children’s Television Program to Address Disability Awareness and a Stop–Bullying Platform in the Schools

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores Realabilities, a video-based children’s television program featuring unique characters, each with a distinct disability. Beyond utilizing video technology to directly teach cognitive and social-emotional skills to children with autism, Realabilities demonstrates how video can be used to foster positive behavioral intentions and cognitive attitudes towards children with autism and other disabilities. Realabilities also reveals how a video medium can promote a stop bullying platform, especially since children with disabilities are at least two to three times more victimized by bullying than their typical peers. One hundred and sixty-six students from schools in Manhattan, NY, and Baltimore, MD, showed more favorable behavioral intentions and cognitive attitudes towards hypothetical peers with disabilities following a three episode viewing of Realabilities. Finally, Realabilities not only showcases the realities of disabilities but shares the potential strengths that children with disabilities possess. This is particularly illuminating, since the Affect/Effort Theory suggests that children are more motivated to interact with others when they possess positive expectancies of their social interaction partners.

INTRODUCTION

Realabilities is a video-based children’s television program, which features unique characters, each with a distinct disability. Each episode presents a social story that heralds a pro-social anti-bullying message to viewers. Through this multimedia format, episodes of the show serve to enhance the sensitivity and understanding of typically developing children towards children with disabilities. The hope is that

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engaging typically developing students will foster positive attitudes and behavioral intentions of typical children towards individuals with disabilities.

It is instructive to teach typical children about disabilities that they may encounter at school and in the community in order for them to learn to be mindful and to make the environment as welcoming and safe as possible for their peers with disabilities. By encouraging typical children to be sensitive, take initiative, and engage in appropriate social interactions with children diagnosed with autism and other disorders, children with disabilities may be able to improve upon certain difficult features of their disorders. These relationships could enhance the school environment and ideally promote children with autism's interest and success in social interaction and social initiation as well as typical children's social-emotional intelligence, understanding and sensitivity (Kamps, Kravitz, Gonzalez-Lopez, Kemmerer, Potucek, & Harrell, 1998).

Autism is one of the most common developmental disorders in the United States, with prevalence rates consistently rising over the last 40 years. Currently 1 out of approximately 88 children is being diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) (Autism Speaks, 2013). While there is no known cure for autism, many therapies have been proven to be beneficial in improving the day-to-day life functioning and quality of life of children with ASD and their families (Autism Speaks, 2013). However, one area that could benefit from greater scrutiny is how to enhance typical children's awareness, sensitivity and understanding towards their peers with ASDs. With the number of ASD diagnoses on the rise, the likelihood of a typically developing child encountering a child with this disorder is high. Providing typical children with the knowledge and tools to appropriately interact with and support their peers with disabilities would be highly beneficial for everyone involved.

Along with autism, there are countless other disabilities that typical children will likely encounter in school and in the community. These disabilities include: deafness, blindness, physical disability, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Down syndrome and others. Despite their limitations, many individuals with special needs possess special abilities and strengths. It is crucial that children who are typically developing appreciate that others with impairments have valuable strengths. Teaching positive behavioral intentions towards individuals with disabilities at a young age, therein fostering increased sensitivity is extremely beneficial in preventing bullying and other poor behaviors as children advance from elementary to junior high school. There is growing evidence that suggests that typical children may be effective agents for inducing change in their peers with developmental disabilities (Pierce & Schreibman, 1997). Research has also shown that without intervention, typically developing peers prefer to interact with one another rather than with children with disabilities (Disalvo & Oswald, 2002; Myles, Simpson, Ormsbee, & Erikson, 1993 & Goldstein, Kaczmarek, & Pennington, 1992). The importance of creating an intervention that encourages typically developing children to engage with their peers with disabilities would be beneficial for both children with disabilities and their typical peers alike.

Our video-based *Realabilities* intervention was designed to create a meaningful medium through which to inspire typical children to be more accepting and to encourage more positive attitudes and intentions towards their peers with disabilities. Children who view pro-social programs are often more altruistic, and involved in more pro-social behaviors (sharing, cooperation, manners) (Mares, 1996). The video intervention was not only created to promote these behaviors, but to challenge the often negative, pathetic portrayals of children with disabilities on television and to replace them with a focus on the special abilities and strengths that individuals with disabilities possess.

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