

Chapter 17

The Role of Rehabilitation Services in the Academic and Social Emotional Development of Children and Young People With Neurodevelopmental Disorders: A Case Study of Vision Impairment

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ABSTRACT

The current chapter discusses the positive role of rehabilitation services in the lives of children and young people with neurodevelopmental disorders such as sensory impairments and also identifies gaps in current research and practice. Despite the increasing number of children and young people with neurodevelopmental disorders, current research on the effects of rehabilitation support on the academic achievement and social emotional development of this population remains very limited. However, financial investment in providing such support to vulnerable student populations may avoid future costs to both the health and social care budgets. To further highlight the impact of rehabilitation support on children and youth with neurodevelopmental disorders, findings from a case study conducted in a UK-based rehabilitation service is presented and discussed. The findings highlight the benefits of habilitation and rehabilitation support in daily life, academic learning and social emotional development of children and adolescents with vision impairment and additional needs.

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INTRODUCTION

There is very limited research data on the impact of rehabilitation support on the academic learning and social emotional development of children and young people with neurodevelopmental disorders. However, research evidence suggests that individuals with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) who have received support from rehabilitation services report high quality of life and positive self-esteem (Bogart, 2014). Other research findings have demonstrated that vision rehabilitation services address numerous life areas that contribute positively to the mental health and wellbeing of individuals with sensory impairments, such as the accomplishment of daily tasks, the participation in social activities and the development of self-confidence (Cimarolli et al., 2006). Previous research has also underlined the positive effects of early intervention on the future physical, educational and mental health outcomes of children with neurodevelopmental disorders such as autism, developmental coordination disorder, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, intellectual disability and sensory impairments (Novak & Morgan, 2019). Further, it has been found that students with vision impairment who have successfully developed their daily living, problem-solving and social skills because of the provision of vocational rehabilitation support, may be future competitive employees who are on the same academic level with their sighted peers (Crudden, 2012). The WHO global disability action plan (2014-2021) has clearly stated the value of rehabilitation services and the importance of extending and strengthening the provision of this support in the areas of health, education, employment, and social life. Specifically, the WHO guidelines have accentuated the importance of investing more in the provision of rehabilitation support that encourages individuals' independence and personal safety in the educational and social environment, as well as their families' welfare. Unfortunately, it appears that whilst the importance of habilitation services is recognised, inconsistencies exist in how this support is accessed as well as inconsistencies in provision across local authorities (Messenger & Palmer (2021). This is particularly pertinent since the RNIB (2024) emphasised the need for early referral to services (specifically referencing Registered Qualified Habilitation Specialists) and their concerns that children with vision impairment do not always get key early intervention.

At this point, it would be useful to explain the difference between the terms “habilitation” and “rehabilitation” support. Although these two terms have been used interchangeably in the literature, habilitation services mainly address the needs of children and adolescents born without vision (congenital vision impairment or blindness) or who have lost their vision before they had the opportunity to gain a clear understanding of the sighted world (Percy-Smith et al., 2017). On the other hand, rehabilitation services address the needs of individuals who have lost their vision once they have gained the appropriate knowledge about different concepts of the sighted world (Rabiee et al., 2016). In that second case, we are referring to people with acquired vision impairment or blindness.

Even though providing specialist services can appear very costly due to the increasing demands on health and social care (Rabiee et al., 2016), investing in professional services and ensuring that children and adolescents with neurodevelopmental disorders, such as vision impairment, receive the specialist support they need to develop as their typically developing peers, may avoid future costs to both health and social care budgets. Receiving appropriate rehabilitation support in a needs-led, person-centred way can significantly promote children's self-confidence and autonomy. This may also enable them to manage the challenges in their academic learning and social emotional development. Thus, they may be more likely to grow up to be independent and less likely to need expensive care packages to support them during their adult life. Given budget cuts in education systems around the world, it is important

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