

# Fostering Barrier Free Access for Children with Special Needs in India

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**Abstract** Barrier Free Access is particularly relevant in the context of children with special needs because they have variety of needs which need to be addressed. The paper will focus on access to the physical environment as well as access to the curriculum and the teaching environment of children with special needs. The various Acts and Policies emphasizing on the provision of barrier free environment would also be discussed. Secondary sources like books, Journals, Articles and websites have been used to collect the information. The adoption of inclusive approaches in education is imperative so that the goal of 'Education for All' can be achieved. It serves as the catalyst for smarter practices and broader perspectives and to improve quality of life of special children. The paper will put forward the strategies for the Institutional planners to help them in developing some mechanism for promoting accessibility and full participation of children with special needs.

**Keywords:** Barrier Free Access, Children with Special Needs, Disability, Acts

## INTRODUCTION

The goal of education for children with or without special needs is to prepare them for a happy, productive and useful civil life. When education has become the right of every child whether able-bodied or disabled, it is important that every child of school going age receives education in the manner he is receptive to. To achieve this aim, education of all children including special children needs to be given importance. They must be provided optimal support in the regular schools. Special children need this all the more to supplement their different talents.

Currently around 10 per cent of the total world's population, or roughly 650 million people, live with a disability. In India 1.67% of the 0-19 population has a disability. 35.29% of all people living with disabilities are children. Other estimates say that India has 12 million children living with disabilities. Only 1% of children with disabilities have access to school and one third of

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most disabilities are preventable. In order to ensure that children with special needs are able to use effectively all public facilities such as hospitals, railway stations, training centres, recreational places, election voting booths, work places and so on, the Government clearly states that it is mandatory for all such public buildings to be completely barrier-free by providing for ramps in public buildings, adaptation of toilets for wheel chair users, Braille symbols and auditory signals in elevators/lifts, ramps in hospitals and other such adaptations, after taking into account unique barriers faced by people with different disabilities. The adoption of barrier free access is imperative so that the goal of 'Education for All' can be achieved. It serves as the catalyst for smarter practices and broader perspectives and to improve quality of life of children with special needs.

### **BARRIER FREE ACCESS**

Barrier Free Access refers to universal access for all children and adults within the schools. This is particularly relevant in the context of children with special needs because they have variety of learning needs which need to be addressed as they face many problems in the society. It is a challenge to the family, society, teachers, administrators as well as institutional mechanism working in the field of education for all. The child may not come to school because of various barriers both social and physical. At the school level there are various barriers starting with the attitude of the teacher to the attitudes of the peer group and most importantly the physical barriers. This should not be limited only to buildings and physical infrastructure, but also to curriculum and teaching learning processes. When physical factors pose barriers to learning and participation, simple ramps and internal classroom arrangements can easily help the situation.

Even various Acts and Policies emphasize on the provision of barrier free environment for children with special needs. Some of them have been cited below:

#### **The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995**

The Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995 (PWD Act) is the most important piece of legislation enacted by the Parliament in the history of disability movement in India. The passing of this Act gave effect to the Proclamation on the Full Participation and Equality of people with disabilities in the Asian and Pacific Region. The objectives of the Persons with Disabilities Act with reference to barrier free access are:

- To create a barrier- free environment for persons with disabilities.
- To make special provisions for including persons with disabilities in mainstream society.
- To lay down strategies that will ensure comprehensive programmes and services and equal opportunities for persons with disabilities.

Provisions under Chapter V of PWD Act ensure that every child with a disability has access to free education in an appropriate and inclusive environment till he attains the age of eighteen years. It stresses on providing education both through formal education systems as well as through non – formal education systems and makes provisions for services in rural areas using locally available human resources. It also commits to ensure that every child with disability has access to using teaching aids and assistive devices that will support the child to learn better.

### **National Trust Act (1999)**

In 1999, the Indian Parliament passed an Act entitled National Trust for the Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation and Multiple Disability Act. This Act seeks to protect and promote the rights of persons who, within the disability sector, have been even more marginalized than others. The objectives, pertaining to barrier free access, of this act are:

- To enable and empower persons with disability to live as independently and as fully as possible within and as close to the community to which they belong.
- To strengthen facilities to provide support to persons with disability.
- To facilitate the realization of equal opportunities, protection of rights and full participation of persons with disability

Though this Act does not directly deal with the education of children with special needs, one of its thrust areas is to promote programmes, which foster inclusion and independence by creating barrier free environment, developing functional skills of the disabled and promoting self-help groups. The Trust provides services through institutional care or in the homes in case the families and their disabled members are unable to access the services outside the house.

### **Biwako Millennium Framework for Action – Inclusive, Barrier Free and Rights Based Society (2003-2012)**

The Asian Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons was extended for another decade, 2003-2012 in order to promote inclusive, barrier-free and rights based society for people with disabilities in the Asian and Pacific region in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is popularly known as Biwako Millennium Framework for Action

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(BMFA). It has 7 priority areas for action. Access to built environments and public transport and access to information and communications, including information, communication and assistive technologies are among those priority areas.

### **UN Convention on the Rights of the Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) 2008**

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The Convention sets out the human rights of persons with disabilities and the obligations on States to promote, protect and ensure those rights as well as mechanisms to support implementation and monitoring. Article 3 sets out the general principles that apply to the enjoyment of the rights of persons with disabilities. Some of them are accessibility, independence, full and effective participation and inclusion in society.

The UNCRPD takes a more positive approach towards working with disability by embodying the principles of equality and the fulfillment of basic and fundamental human rights and freedoms. It calls for governments to ensure that reasonable accommodations are made for persons with disabilities to carry on their activities on par with others. The Convention also encourages governments to oblige private parties and organizations to ensure that their services are accessible to all. It further recognizes the importance of all round development of disabled individuals and calls for accommodations and accessibility in areas like recreation and sports as well in addition to the general ones like education, employment, etc.

### **Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)**

The key objective of SSA is Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE). Three important aspects of UEE are access, enrolment and retention of all children in 6-14 years of age. This Amendment has given a new thrust to the education of children with special needs (CWSN), as without their inclusion, the objective of UEE cannot be achieved. In-fact inclusion of one of the groups, which is extremely crucial for UEE, is perhaps that of the CWSN. Hence, education of CWSN is an important component of SSA.

Two additional forms of resource support, complimentary to each other, being provided to CWSN are through assistive devices and barrier free access. Both of these aim at enhancement of the functional capacity and mobility of CWSN to promote their easy access to the schools. 7.11 lakh CWSN (76.44% of the CWSN requiring aids and appliances) under SSA have been provided assistive devices through various modes. Schools are being made more disabled friendly by incorporating barrier free features in their designs.

5.02 lakh schools have been made barrier-free and much focused efforts are being made by all the States to cover more schools in a phased manner. Only 47.14% schools have been made barrier-free. This aspect of Inclusive Education in SSA needs more focus. Although States have increased the pace of expenditure, it needs to be further geared up. The reality today indicates that 25% of the world's population cannot read and write. In our country more than 100 million children have no access to schooling.

Keeping all these directives in mind, India is moving towards the objective of Education for All by shifting from the goal of integration to the goal of inclusion. Inclusion is remodeling, reform and enrichment of the general education system, making it more comprehensive, supportive and responsive to the needs of all children. It also addresses the needs of special needs children. In inclusive education children with disabilities are provided quality education in regular school with their age and grade peers with support services provided within the school system. It is about creating inclusive policy, Inclusive Culture and Inclusive Practices at all levels of the system. It cannot go very far without developing the capacity of schools to respond to children's diversity. It is about transformation of traditional approach to new approach of teaching and learning. Inclusive education is seen as a means by which educational development of each child can take place. Thus, it reflects the objective of providing quality education to all children without any distinctions. But there are certain challenges which are being faced in this process which include social attitude towards disability, lack of awareness, scarcity of trained teachers, absence of barrier-free environment and proper learning material.

## **GENERAL STRATEGIES FOR BARRIER FREE ENVIRONMENT**

General strategies include access to the physical environment as well as access to the curriculum and the teaching environment. Whereas the access to the physical environment mainly takes care of the children with orthopaedic impairment as well as visual impairment, access to the curriculum and teaching learning environment is particularly important for children with visual impairment, hearing impairment, intellectually challenged, children with cerebral palsy and children with multiple disabilities.

### **Access to Physical Environment**

The following may be adopted to provide easy access to physical environment:

- The path from the gate to the school buildings and playground must be clear and leveled.

- All entrances and doorways in the school buildings should be between minimum 4' to 5' feet wide.
- The toilet inside the school should be accessible to Children With Special Needs (CWSN). This toilet should be fitted with commode and grab-rails.
- The drinking water outlet should be accessible to CWSN also.
- Avoid sharp turns in the walkways.
- The walkway must be clear of any hung and protruding obstructions such as windows, lights, low branches, flower pots and sign posts etc.
- A handrail should be provided at any dangerous point in the walkway.
- Guard rails and kerbs are a must in situations where there is a sudden change in the level of height including stairs and verandah.
- The ends of the handrails should be bent downwards to avoid injury.
- Steps should be of equal and even heights.
- Bright colours (preferably yellow) should be used at every change in slope, at the beginning and ending of a staircase for easy recognition.
- All signages should be in print, visuals and Braille at the readable height (minimum 3 feet) of the children.
- All the surfaces should be non-slippery and loose gravel or cobbles should be avoided.
- Natural lighting should be optimized. There should be enough windows to allow adequate ventilation and lighting.
- Safety of all children should be ensured by provision of hazard free environment (broken window panes, broken steps, broken fixture and furniture, unsafe ceilings, etc).
- The school/ classroom design should allow the teacher to be able to pay personal attention to the child, including effective positioning and placement, keeping in mind the individual needs of CWSN.

### **Access to Curriculum/Teaching Learning Processes**

- Adaptation and accommodations needs to be made in procedures for assessment, use of teaching strategies including signs & gestures and use of teaching learning material as per the needs of varied needs of CWSN
- Availability and accessibility to teaching learning material within the class rooms to be ensured.
- Ensure participation of CWSN in all curricular and co-curricular activities.
- Use of peer support effectively to ensure increased participation of CWSN in schools.
- Use of enabling technologies to meet the needs of CWSN.

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Some Children with Special Needs (CWSN) might have one predominant disability with associated difficulties. The strategies under the appropriate disability discussed below can help to develop some mechanism to provide barrier free access to children with special needs. These may be adapted or modified according to the individual needs of the child.

### **Strategies for Children with Moving Difficulties and Cerebral Palsy**

- Ensure wheel chair accessibility to classrooms, toilets, office rooms, playground, etc
- The prescribed gradient of the ramp- 1:12 should be strictly adhered to and all ramps should be fitted with handrails.
- Aids and appliances like- callipers, wheel chairs, braces, special chairs, crutches, wedges, pencil grips, communication boards, etc. should be made available.
- Ensure adequate space allocation to meet individual needs of children using assistive devices
- Ensure proper positioning and safe/careful handling of children with cerebral palsy, with the help of the resource teacher/parent
- All classes and teaching facilities for these children should be provided on the ground floor.
- Arrange for a suitable writer for children with writing difficulties.
- Ensure enough response time to children with cerebral palsy. This is important as they might have communication and speech problems.

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### **Strategies for Children With Intellectual Difficulties / Mental Retardation**

Since this section mainly focuses on adaptation in teaching learning processes, the following need to be emphasized:

- Ensure that visual, tactile and pictorial learning aids are available and accessible.
- Level of difficulty of both language and content need to be adapted as per the comprehension level of the child.
- Use of concrete objects as TLM, needs to be emphasized.
- Give enough time for individualized teaching learning opportunities.
- Based on the child's level of understanding, the content and evaluation should be adapted. (For example- numbers of concepts taught could be reduced if required; questions could mainly be multiple choices/fill in the blanks, etc).

### **Strategies for Children With Hearing Difficulties**

Since language and communication is the major barrier for this group of children, the following needs to be emphasized:

- Provision of suitable hearing aids and their maintenance should be ensured.
- The resource teacher should provide auditory training to make optimum use of the residual hearing of the child.
- Seating of the child should be such that s/he gets a clear view of teacher's face (for lip reading) as well as the black board.
- Ensure increased use of pictorial teaching learning materials.
- Level of difficulty of language needs to be adapted as per the comprehension level of the child.
- Ensure use of Indian Sign Language with the help of the resource teacher, if required.
- Children with language acquisition problems should be exempted from the 3-language formula. Sign Language can be used as an option.
- Sign language can be given as an option under co-curricular activity to enhance peer support.
- Assessment procedures may include objective type questions, instead of essay type questions for children with difficulties in language acquisition.
- Extra response time needs to be provided, wherever necessary
- Children with language difficulties should be exposed to language acquisition and reading softwares.

### **Strategies for Children with Visual Difficulties**

- Ensure availability of accessible teaching learning material (Braille, large print, audio, e-text, etc).
- Making science labs accessible by Braille labelling, tactile charts/diagram.
- Ensure increased use of verbal instructions/directions while teaching.
- Ensure availability and use of embossed and tactile TLM (maps, globes, charts, models, diagrams, etc).
- Availability, training and use of aids and appliances (Braille, Taylor frame, white cane, abacus, low vision aids, magnifiers, etc) should be ensured.
- Availability and training in screen-reading and scanning softwares should be done.



- Training in daily living skills, orientation & mobility (like- human guide technique) must be provided to children with seeing difficulties, as per the needs.
- Ensure effective orientation of children with seeing difficulties in school environment with active involvement of peers.
- Proper training to be imparted to children with low vision in making optimum use of residual vision with the help of resource teacher.
- The school environment including the walkways should be safe and free of all obstructions.
- Warning strips/textures to be provided before the beginning of steps/kerbs etc so that children with visual impairment do not have an accidental fall.
- Seating of a child with low vision should be such that s/he gets a clear view of teacher's face as well as the black board.

### **Strategies for Children with Multiple Disabilities**

- Availability, training and use of appropriate aids and appliances should be ensured.
- Access to communication and information in the required language through interpreters, electronic devices, etc. should be ensured.
- Information to be provided in appropriate format (Braille, sign language, etext, large print, tactile, audio-visual, etc).
- Teaching needs to be more application oriented, experiential and practical for this group of children.
- Training in mobility and daily living skills should be provided with support of resource teacher/parents/peers
- Effective use of peer support to enhance communication and mobility skills
- Use of appropriate technology, technological aids and software, like PacMate for deaf-blind, should be encouraged.

These are few strategies which can help to develop some mechanism to provide barrier free access to children with special needs. Recommendations, however, by themselves are nothing more than pious sentiments. To make them meaningful and effective, one has to give them life through dedicated efforts and commitment in order that the goal 'To make disabled equal partners in development' becomes a living reality. Improvements in the physical environment, such as the design of the building, will enable special students to participate in the range of learning activities in and out of the classroom.

It is, therefore, essential to bring a change in social climate to foster the development of children with special needs. School must be in a position to provide 'equality in difference'. It implies that treat all children as equal but not necessarily in the same way. Hence it is said that it is the school where diverse needs among the children can be recognized and available resources can be utilized to meet those needs, which is vital for ideal inclusion.

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## CONCLUSION

The types of disabilities are based on sensory, intellectual and physical aspects of the individuals. Nature of each disability is different from the other but some of their needs are common, particularly, the societal attitude and barrier-free environment. Educational institutions should preferably follow a holistic approach of providing rehabilitative services. The local authorities and heads of institutions should consciously provide a barrier-free environment to enable the children with special needs to study in a regular school. The provision of mobility aids and appliances as well as disabled friendly furniture and transport should also be considered. To provide easier access to children with disabilities having difficulties in mobility and moving around in the school premises, it is compulsory to remove architectural barriers or to modify existing architectural facilities. Therefore, we need to understand the problems in the educational system and should foster barrier free access so as to ensure that every child learns.

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## **WEBSITE**

[www.disabled-world.com](http://www.disabled-world.com)

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[www.ssa.nic.in](http://www.ssa.nic.in)

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