

Revisiting Social Stigma and Its Consequences for Children with Intellectual Disabilities

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Abstract

This literature review aims to examine the various forms of social stigma faced by children with intellectual disabilities, both within the country and internationally. The method used is a literature study, which involves collecting and analysing data from various relevant scientific research studies and synthesizing them to identify key themes that form the basis of the conclusions. The findings of this literature review indicate that social stigma toward individuals with intellectual disabilities remains a serious global challenge. Such stigma directly affects self-confidence, social participation, access to education, and the overall quality of life of the individuals concerned, as well as their families. The conclusion that can be drawn is that societal stigma has a direct impact on the self-esteem, social involvement, educational opportunities, and quality of life of individuals with intellectual disabilities and their families. A lack of public understanding is the root cause of stigma, which is further reinforced by the media, educational systems, and non-inclusive social norms.

Keywords: Social Stigma, Intellectual Disability, Literature Review, Public Understanding.

Manuscript History

Received: 23 July 2025 Revised: 5 November 2025 Accepted: 4 December 2025

How to cite:

Aulia, D. S. I. I., Aulia, A. R., Putri, M. D. D., Yoissiky, G., Maulidina, C. A., & Taboer, M. A. (2025). Revisiting social stigma and its consequences for children with intellectual disabilities. *International Disability Innovation Journal*, 1(2),84-92.

INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, there is Law No. 8 of 2016 concerning persons with disabilities, which legally protects persons with disabilities, including children with intellectual disabilities. Despite being protected by law, children with intellectual disabilities still face discrimination in society, one form of which is social stigma. Stigma is the extreme disapproval of a person or group of people based on certain characteristics that distinguish them or make their presence undesirable in the community. Stigma is also a set of negative beliefs held by a person to justify the injustice held by a group of people about something. Stigma related to children with intellectual disabilities is all the prejudices that originate from one's own thoughts or those of others in the form of discrimination or insults directed at people who live with intellectual disabilities, their families, and those closest to them.

The number of people with disabilities in Indonesia is quite large. According to data uploaded on the official website of the Coordinating Ministry for Human Development and Culture, there are 22.97 million people with disabilities in Indonesia, which represents about 8.5% of the total population (Supanji, 2023). Among them, there are adolescents or children with intellectual disabilities, and it is estimated that there are around 233,717 individuals classified as persons with intellectual disabilities in Indonesia (Statistics, 2022). Children with intellectual disabilities are those who have an intelligence level that is significantly below average compared to their peers, accompanied by an inability to adapt during the stages of development (Ambarwati, 2020). In their daily lives, they cannot escape the social stigma imposed by their surroundings.

Negative narratives about the limitations of adolescents with intellectual disabilities are still often heard. This leads to lifelong dependence on the family as caregivers and has physical and psychological impacts on individuals, families, and society (Hartatik, 2021).

Social stigma in society regarding children with intellectual disabilities varies greatly, but most of it is negative. There are various types of social stigma, such as public stigma, self-stigma, felt or perceived stigma, structural stigma, experience stigma, and label avoidance. The impact of negative social stigma causes children to experience discrimination in the form of exclusion, rejection, bullying, limited accessibility, and difficulties in accessing various things, which makes people with disabilities even more powerless (Tsaniyah, Mutmainnah, Azizah, Fahmy, & Masfia, 2024). In the article "The Influence of Social Stigma on Children with Intellectual Disabilities," social stigma contributes to feelings of low self-esteem, social isolation, and barriers to inclusive education. Negative attitudes from the environment often reinforce existing limitations, thereby hindering the optimal development of children. This stigma not only affects their personal development but also impacts social interactions and access to inclusive education (Zaskia et al. 2025).

In a study conducted by Nursholichah, Mufarrohah, & Setyo (2024), it was shown that the cause of negative stigma towards children with disabilities is due to the community's low understanding of disability. The emergence of social stigma experienced by children with intellectual disabilities is largely caused by a lack of knowledge or understanding among the community about this issue. A lack of direct interaction with them can also shape opinions based solely on unfounded prejudices or fears. The media, which spreads negative narratives or stereotypes that focus only on their shortcomings rather than their strengths, is also one of the causes. In fact, every human being has strengths and weaknesses, and children with intellectual disabilities are no different. They also have potential that can be developed, and they can become students who can learn just like children without intellectual disabilities. Of course, this requires support from the environment, society, and especially families to understand the needs of children with intellectual disabilities so that this social stigma will gradually disappear.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that social stigma against children with intellectual disabilities is a complex issue and remains a real challenge in efforts to create an inclusive society, because stigma not only affects children's psychosocial development, but also worsens their access to education, social participation, and equal life opportunities. Therefore, our research focuses deeply on the social stigma attached to people with intellectual disabilities and its impact, as well as strategies for dealing with existing social stigma through a comprehensive literature review. This literature review was created as an effort to overcome this social stigma, which requires adaptive behaviors such as self-acceptance, education, and the formation of inclusive communities, a multidimensional approach involving continuous public education, the promotion of social acceptance through positive media, the strengthening of regulations that favor persons with disabilities, and the empowerment of families as agents of change. To increase public understanding of the needs and strengths of children with intellectual disabilities, build collective awareness in society to respect diversity, eliminate discrimination, and positively influence the development of individuals with intellectual disabilities, so that individuals with intellectual disabilities can reach their maximum potential, independence, better quality of life, and become more empowered without being hindered by social stigma.

METHOD

This review uses a literature review method, which involves collecting data based on scientific research results and comparing them with the results of other researchers to draw a general conclusion. We then compare the conclusion with the actual conditions in the field using descriptive analysis as the final conclusion of our journal review. This study focuses on the topic of stigma against children with intellectual disabilities. Therefore, the search results are also related and in line with the topic focus.

We obtained our literature data from various sources such as Google Scholar, Researchgate, and various academic websites. The criteria for articles used in this literature study were articles published in the last six years, namely from 2019 to 2025. This literature study aims to identify various social stigmas against children with intellectual disabilities, both domestically and internationally. Thus, the author selected the appropriate article data, resulting in a total of 8 articles, including 4 national articles and 4 international articles.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Stigma is a set of negative beliefs held by a person to justify the perceived injustice of a group of people about a particular aspect. (Kristiyanti, 2019) states that Stigma is a form of response given by society that damages the identity of others. Stigma generally arises in conjunction with stereotypes, labeling, and prejudice. According to Goffman, the people who are most often stigmatized are homosexuals, former mental patients, blind and deaf people, and people with certain types of disabilities. Stigma related to children with intellectual disabilities is all negative preconceptions that originate from one’s own mind or that of others in the form of discrimination or insults directed at people who live with intellectual disabilities, their families, and those closest to them. The following are several related articles:

Table 1. Data analysis matrix for journals and related articles

No.	Author, Year, Title	Method	Research Results
1.	Pelleboer-Gunnink H.A, Weeghel J.V, Embregts P.J.C.M, 2021, <i>Public stigmatization of people with intellectual disabilities: a mixed-method population survey into stereotypes and their relationship with familiarity and discrimination.</i>	A mixed-method cross-sectional survey quantitative and qualitative	This study discusses how society stigmatizes individuals with intellectual disabilities through existing stereotypes (friendly, in need of help, unintelligent, a nuisance) and their relationship with a person’s level of knowledge about individuals with intellectual disabilities, which can influence public perception and the level of discrimination they face. Of the four stereotypes mentioned, three received above-average results, namely friendly, in need of help, and unintelligent. Of these three stereotypes, the most commonly reported was “in need of help,” which refers to aspects of dependence and inability, such as being considered “less independent.” In contrast, the stereotype of “nuisance” was not found to be a prominent stereotype for people with intellectual disabilities. This study found that there are both positive and negative stereotypes. However, the most frequent stereotypes are often harmful, such as the notion that individuals are less independent and require assistance. It can trigger subtle forms of discrimination, such as limited opportunities, being overlooked, and denied rights, which can lead to inequality and restricted participation.
2.	Tsaniyah A.M, et al., 2024, <i>The impact of social stigma and adaptation strategies on adolescents with intellectual</i>	Qualitative approach using case study method	This study found that the social stigma experienced by parents of adolescents with intellectual disabilities is still high in Indonesia, including segregation, discrimination, such as bullying, being ignored by teachers, and being separated from social activities, and labeling, such as being unable to do anything, dependent, and stupid.

	<i>disabilities at the Kinasih Inclusive Disability Home.</i>		It hurts individuals with intellectual disabilities, such as loss of self-confidence, and also affects families, especially parents, who receive negative comments. This study also discusses appropriate strategies to mitigate the impact and provide a safe space and development opportunities for children with intellectual disabilities, such as promoting self-acceptance and inclusive communities.
3.	Hartatik, 2021, <i>Self-Stigma With Self-Esteem in Families of Mental Retardation</i>	Survey analytical cross-sectional	Research conducted in Sidoharjo Village, Jambon District, shows a moderate correlation between self-stigma and self-esteem in families of people with intellectual disability. Despite having moderate self-stigma, they have a positive outlook, are not ashamed to show that they live with and care for people with intellectual disability, and live openly without hiding the situation. Several factors, such as life experience, occupation, age, gender, perception, and education, may contribute to the reason why many families in Sidoharjo Village still maintain positive self-esteem. Although higher self-stigma may lower self-esteem, in Sidoharjo Village, not everyone with self-stigma will also experience low self-esteem.
4.	Weronica Gieniec, Beata Jurkiewicz, 2023, <i>Perception of People With Intellectual Disabilities by Residents of the Tarnow Region, Poland</i>	A diagnostic survey using a survey questionnaire	This study was conducted in the Tarnow region, Poland. Of the 314 respondents, most claimed to understand intellectual disability as an inability to develop fully. One-third of respondents claimed to have neighbors or relatives with intellectual disabilities and admitted to having participated in several activities organized by organizations that help people with intellectual disabilities. Some of their sources of knowledge about intellectual disabilities were the internet, personal experience, and school. They agreed that their children should be placed in the same school as children with intellectual disabilities, and they also agreed that people with intellectual disabilities should work and receive equal pay.

5.	Zaskia, AH, Maulidina, CA, Azalia, V, & ... (2025). The Influence of Social Stigma on Children with Intellectual Disabilities. UNIK Journal	qualitative method with a <i>literature review</i> approach	This study shows that social stigma is a significant obstacle that affects the development of children with intellectual disabilities, especially in emotional, social, and educational aspects. Through a comprehensive literature review, it was found that social stigma can cause feelings of inferiority, social isolation, and difficulties in accessing inclusive education. Negative attitudes from the surrounding environment also tend to reinforce the limitations of children, thereby hindering their optimal development. Therefore, a more holistic approach to education and social interaction is essential so that children with intellectual disabilities can develop to their full potential without being hindered by Stigma.
6.	Desbrow, J Mampaso, Ruano, Á Moraleda, & ... (2024). Stigmatising young people with intellectual disability: Perceptions of the main stakeholders at a Spanish university. Journal of Intellectual	quantitative method with an <i>ex post facto</i> design.	This study shows that Stigma, both public and internal (self-stigma), remains a significant challenge for individuals with intellectual disabilities in the process of full integration into higher education. This study examines the perceptions of various university stakeholders, students, lecturers, and administrative and service staff—regarding the presence of students with intellectual disabilities. The results show that women tend to have lower perceptions of Stigma than men. In addition, students with intellectual disabilities have a higher awareness of public Stigma and self-stigma than students without disabilities. These findings indicate a gap in perceptions based on gender and role within the institution, as well as the importance of socio-educational interventions aimed at promoting inclusion, overcoming self-stigma, and improving the independence and emotional well-being of students with intellectual disabilities.
7.	Anisa Rakhmania (2019). Parents of Children with Intellectual Disabilities in Interpreting Public Stigma Towards Their Children	Qualitative method using Alfred Schutz's phenomenological theory and Erving Goffman's stigma theory	This study shows that many people stigmatize the parents of these children, saying that they are careless or that they are receiving karma for their parents' past actions. The community also discriminates against the children and assumes that they could harm them. The parents' response is to interpret the Stigma as something that should not be overly concerning. Instead, they see it as motivation to improve in educating and supporting their children.

8.	Zamorano, Santos-Olmo, Sánchez-Iglesias, Muñoz-Lara, & Muñoz (2024). The Stigma of Intellectual Disability in Spain: A Nationally Representative Survey	Descriptive quantitative survey method with 2,746 respondents (aged 18 years and above)	This study shows that Stigma against people with intellectual disabilities in Spain remains a significant barrier to their social inclusion. Educational efforts, social contact-based approaches, and evidence-based public policies are urgently needed to effectively and sustainably reduce this Stigma—the majority of the public displays neutral to somewhat positive attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities. However, negative attributions persist, such as viewing ID as an individual weakness or a result of family circumstances. Many respondents are willing to work with or be friends with people with ID, but there are still objections to closer relationships (such as family marriage).
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After analyzing the eight journals above (Table 1), several different perspectives on social stigma towards individuals with intellectual disabilities were found. Despite their differences in perspective, the findings of these journals are still interrelated and relevant to the topic of “Social Stigma Towards Children with Intellectual Disabilities.”

Articles one, two, five, and six show the existence of Stigma and negative stereotypes towards individuals with intellectual disabilities and the impact this has on various aspects. Article 1 found that there are both positive and negative stereotypes in the Netherlands, with four stereotypes emerging: “disruptive”, “needs help”, “friendly”, and “less intelligent”. When ranked, the Stigma of “needing help” was in first place because individuals who are close to people with intellectual disabilities feel that they need more help than others and tend to depend on the help of others. Meanwhile, in last place was the Stigma of “disruptive,” with 1%–8% of participants associating individuals with intellectual disabilities with disruptive behavior. It is due to the lack of interaction or closeness between participants and individuals with intellectual disabilities. It is also mentioned that the level of familiarity or knowledge of the community towards individuals with intellectual disabilities can influence the stereotypes accepted by individuals with intellectual disabilities.

In line with this, the sixth article examines social stigma in higher education, specifically at Camilo José Cela University in Spain. This study shows that women have a lower perspective of individuals with intellectual disabilities than men. In addition, students with intellectual disabilities have a higher awareness of public Stigma and self-stigma than students without disabilities. Similar to the Netherlands and Spain, social stigma cases are still prevalent in Indonesia. Typical forms of social stigma include negative labeling based on individual differences, segregation in education, and discrimination in the form of demeaning behavior. This view is in line with the concept of Stigma described by Goffman (1963): “Stigma is a mark or attribute that discredits individuals and makes them unacceptable to society. Goffman emphasizes that Stigma often arises from society’s ignorance or misunderstanding of certain individuals’ conditions.”

The second article adds that social stigma not only affects individuals with intellectual disabilities, but also their families. The impact on individuals with intellectual disabilities is quite significant, as noted in the second article, which states that there are adolescents with intellectual disabilities who are not recorded in Indonesia’s official population data. Children with intellectual disabilities also face barriers in accessing education, such as difficulty finding schools that suit their needs. In addition, mothers of children with intellectual disabilities often receive inhumane and demeaning comments, such as “...there is something wrong with your womb because both of your children are not normal.” The fifth article reinforces these findings, explaining that social stigma can have a significant impact on the emotional, social, and educational aspects of individuals’ lives. These impacts include feelings of inferiority, social isolation, and difficulties in accessing

inclusive education. Negative treatment from the environment can actually reinforce existing limitations, thereby hindering optimal individual development.

In contrast, Article 3 describes the situation in a village in Sidoarjo, nicknamed “Kampung Idiot” (Village of Idiots). This article explains that social stigma is closely related to self-stigma, where the less social stigma individuals with intellectual disabilities receive, the higher the self-stigma they possess. Self-stigma refers to a person’s negative self-perception, influenced by societal prejudices and stereotypes. Although the village has a negative label, this does not affect the attitude of the community and families towards individuals with intellectual disabilities. In fact, they are open to acknowledging the existence of family members with such conditions. Article 7 also mentions the same thing, where parents who have children with intellectual disabilities consider Stigma as encouragement and motivation to become better at educating their children.

There is a unique finding in the 7th article, where negative stigma in society looks down on parents who have children with intellectual disabilities. They assume that parents who have children with intellectual disabilities are careless or are receiving karma for their past deeds. Although negative stigma is prevalent in society, the parents of these children consider it a driving force and motivation to improve their children’s education. Article 4 discusses the situation in Poland. Some people there admit to knowing or having family members with intellectual disabilities. They generally agree that individuals with intellectual disabilities are entitled to equal opportunities, both in terms of employment (such as access to work and fair wages), social aspects (a discrimination-free environment), and education. Article 8 explains that Stigma against people with disabilities in Spain remains a significant barrier to their social inclusion. Efforts needed to reduce this stigma include a social contact-based approach and evidence-based public policies. The majority of the community shows a neutral to positive attitude, but still considers it harmful or objectionable to have a close relationship with people with disabilities, whether it be marriage to a sibling or close relative.

Social stigma in society towards children with intellectual disabilities varies greatly, mostly leaning towards negative perceptions. Van Brakel in Fiorillo, Volpe, and Bhugra (2016) reveals that there are five types of Stigma, such as public Stigma, which is an adverse reaction from the general public who have family members or friends with physical or mental illnesses. Structural stigma refers to the rejection of an employee who experiences stigmatization by institutions, laws, or companies. Self-stigma refers to a decline in self-esteem and self-confidence in individuals who experience stigmatization. Felt or perceived Stigma is a negative feeling of worry that arises within oneself, leading to a desire to distance oneself from the community. Experienced Stigma refers to the experience of an individual who has been subjected to discrimination by others, such as being rejected and treated in an inappropriate manner. Label avoidance is when someone does not participate in health services to avoid their status as a person with an intellectual disability. As mentioned in articles 2 and 5, the negative stigma that arises in society not only affects children but also their families. Families are often blamed for their children’s condition, considered incapable of educating them, or become the subject of gossip. In their daily activities, adolescents with intellectual disabilities often lose their freedom and opportunities to socialize with their environment. This occurs because of restrictions imposed by parents, who are concerned about their children’s ability to socialize. This reinforces the Labeling Theory (Becker, 1963), which posits that social labeling can influence how individuals are perceived and treated by society, as well as how they perceive themselves.

Ideally, society should view individuals with intellectual disabilities based on the principles of equality, inclusivity, and respect for human rights. Instead of viewing them as a burden, lacking potential, or even merely objects of pity, society should ideally view individuals with intellectual disabilities as part of the community who also have potential, the right to education, and meaningful contributions to make. This aligns with the findings in the fourth article, which indicate that Polish society agrees that individuals with intellectual disabilities are entitled to equal opportunities in terms of employment (including access to work and fair wages), social aspects (a discrimination-free environment), and education. However, in reality, many still blame individuals for all their limitations, giving rise to various stigmas that are detrimental to individuals with intellectual disabilities. In fact, according to the “Social Model of Disability” theory, it is not the limitations that are wrong, but rather the social systems and structures that have failed to provide fair and accessible spaces. Research (Werner, 2015) shows that a lack of education and understanding about disabilities often

exacerbates negative perceptions in society. Furthermore, research conducted by Nurscholichah et al. (2024) using a case study approach shows that communities with low understanding of disability tend to treat children with disabilities unequally, which impacts their psychological and social development.

To overcome these challenges, strategic approaches and measures involving various parties are needed. Based on the results of the interviews from the second article, the implementation of specific strategies includes self-acceptance, especially for parents, as self-acceptance can help them focus more on their children's development and potential. Then, by providing education about the rights and appropriate treatment of adolescents with intellectual disabilities, awareness can be increased, and the community can be encouraged to be more supportive. The government, organizations, and families of adolescents with disabilities can provide this education. In addition, an inclusive community can also help adolescents with intellectual disabilities face educational and self-development challenges while reducing the impact of exclusive or discriminatory behavior. The existence of such a community also strengthens self-confidence and provides a space for children to explore.

CONCLUSION

Social stigma against individuals with intellectual disabilities remains a serious challenge, both in Indonesia and in various other countries. This Stigma has a direct impact on the self-confidence, social involvement, access to education, and quality of life of individuals with intellectual disabilities and their families. A lack of public understanding is the leading root cause of Stigma, which is then reinforced by the media, the education system, and social norms that are not inclusive.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Aulia, Difa Syahidah Izzah: Conceptualization, Methodology, Project Administration; Yoissiky, Geraldus: Methodology, Writing, Formal Analysis; Putri, Meisya Desma Dwi: Resources, Writing, Data Curation; Aulia, Amelia Rahmawati: Validation, Original Draft, Resources; Maulidina, Citra Asih: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Validation; Taboer, Mohammad Arif: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Validation.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare no known financial conflicts of interest or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this manuscript.

DECLARATION OF ETHICS

The authors declare that the research and writing of this manuscript adhere to ethical standards of research and publication, in accordance with scientific principles, and are free from plagiarism.

DECLARATION OF ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

The authors declare that Generative Artificial Intelligence and other assistive technologies were not excessively utilized in the research and writing processes of this manuscript.

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