

Disability and Abuse: Evidence-Based Data Should Drive the Narrative

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Abstract

“Children with disabilities are 1.7 to 3.4 times more likely to be victims of abuse than children without disabilities.” This is the narrative that many educators and advocates have been using for nearly two decades. What they have not been citing is a federal study released in 2010 showing that children without disabilities are 1.4 times more likely to be abused than children with disabilities.

Another rarely-cited resource is a book published in 2016 analyzing 31 studies of disability and child abuse. This meta review questions the accuracy and usefulness of broad-based statistical pronouncements. Some of the studies reviewed in the book found similar rates of abuse for children with and without disabilities. Others found lower rates and still others found higher rates. The variations depended on the type of abuse that occurred and the nature of the disability of the group being compared.

Studies of adults with disabilities have shown similar fluctuations in rates.

This commentary encourages educators and advocates to be more cautious when declaring comparative rates of abuse for children and adults with and without disabilities.

It is accurate to state that people with disabilities, as a class, may be at heightened risk of abuse. Rates vary depending on the type of abuse and the type of disability under consideration.

Data showing heightened risk of abuse should not be selectively used in narratives on disability and abuse. Audiences of readers or listeners should be informed of the wide range of statistics developed by dozens of studies over the past three decades. While such a nuanced statistical approach will make the narrative more complicated for presenters, it will be more helpful to audiences, especially when those who read or hear the narrative are people who make or implement public policy.

The commentary is online at: <https://spectruminstitute.org/evidence-based-data.pdf>