

In this special programme, we investigate what it's like to be a disabled child in the UK.

They laugh at me and they point at me and they stare at me and I really don't like that.

Are disabled children getting the support they need?

School is stressful.

And do they feel like they're treated equally?

Makes me feel pretty angry.

We meet four disabled young people to find out what challenges they face.

It's really really unfair.

Over one in ten children in the UK are disabled, roughly 1.5 million, and that includes me. I was born with a deformity of my left leg, which meant I couldn't straighten it and it was shorter and weaker than my other leg. I spent ten years in and out of hospital trying to fix it, but nothing really worked.

So after talking to my doctors, I decided to have amputated at the knee. I believe that my disability shouldn't stop me doing anything and most of the time it doesn't. But occasionally other people see my disability and think I can't or shouldn't do certain things, and that's pretty annoying.

This week, a major report was released by the Disabled Children's Partnership, a group of over 120 charities that work together to help support disabled children.

The report was based on a survey from hundreds of disabled children looking at what life is like for them. And some of the findings are pretty shocking.

Only one in five disabled young people feel that they have the right amount of support to achieve the things they want in life.

Over 45% of disabled children wait longer than 18 weeks for health care.

And only 25% have the right support to enjoy their hobby.

The report reveals that disabled children often feel frustrated, ignored and even excluded from everyday life.

I went to meet 12 year old George to find out about his fight for equality.

Morning!

Morning George.

How did you sleep?

George lives in Tunbridge Wells with his mum, sister Evie, Maggie, Max and Mitzi.

George was born with a condition called Spinal Muscular Atrophy Type 2, which makes his muscles weaker. It's caused by a loss of nerve cells that control muscle movement in the body.

But this doesn't stop George getting the most he can out of life. He's a tireless campaigner for SMA awareness and better access to treatment.

I wanted to find out what life has been like for George growing up with a disability and whether he feels that enough is being done to help support kids like him.

So George, what are some of the everyday challenges you face?

One of the biggest challenges I face is the lack of independence. Doing my teeth, transferring, breakfast, lunch, dinner and basic needs such as put my shoes in as well.

One thing that has really improved George's quality of life is his new wheelchair, which helps him to get around far more easily than the one that was provided by the NHS.

With this one, he can access hard to reach places.

I'm guessing it was pretty expensive, right?

Yes. It costed £24,000.

That is a lot of money.

We had to fundraise for this chair. It's kinda embarrassing. And also it makes me feel pretty angry. It doesn't feel normal to ask people for money because this is something that wheelchair user needs.

Which you would think that the government would provide.

But despite having an amazing chair, George still encounters lots of accessibility problems when he's out and about.

What are some of the issues that can come up?

Lifts in stations, some lifts are out of order. Stores with stairs. But one of the main issues are dropped curbs.

This is the only way to get into town. But there's no dropped curb here, so I can't even go into town.

Another issue that annoys George is a lack of accessible playgrounds where he lives.

When you see other people on the swings as I am disabled, then I'm not allowed to join in that makes me very angry and upset.

One thing that can be a changed, do you see that roundabout over there?

So there are roundabouts that are accessible for wheelchair users. If they could put one in, it would make me really happy.

This is simple things that can make a big difference.

Yeah.

George doesn't let his disability define him, but more really needs to be done to make sure that all children can access public spaces and that there's proper funding for the right specialised equipment that people like George need.

One key area that the Disabled Children's Partnership report focuses on is education.

According to their findings, only two in five disabled young people feel they get the support they need at school or college.

They found that when children don't get enough support, they sometimes experience long periods of absence from school or even leave education altogether.

I'm here in Bristol to meet 11 year old Isla, who's autistic, and she hasn't been going to school for the past nine months.

Hi. Hi, Sarah. How are you guys?

Yeah, we're starting off my visit with one of Isla's favourite things to do - the fun and relaxed activity of slime making.

You don't go to school, right?

Of course not. I hate it there. School is stressful.

We tried to tell them that they need to understand me, but they didn't.

Not all disabilities are visible. Isla's brain works a bit differently to many others.

Autistic people can find it harder to communicate and interact with others. They may have their own strengths and challenges. Some of the most basic tasks are overwhelming to Isla.

We can't do it unless she watches something to try and take her mind off of the pain.

Stop it.

So brushing her hair and teeth and even getting dressed can be difficult and on some days impossible.

A part of isla's autism means that sometimes her nervous system sees commands as a threat, which means an instruction from an adult can really stress her out.

That made primary school really hard.

The teachers, if I got stressed, they would drag me into a room and lock me in there so I could get my anger out.

And how does that make you feel?

Sad.

Isla got so overwhelmed that she went from hiding under tables to trying to climb the school gates to escape.

I hated it so much. I didn't want to be there, so obviously I wanted to escape it. So I tried, but they didn't let me.

It took three and a half years for Isla to be diagnosed as autistic, and she was falling further behind in her education.

Finally, in September 2023, she started attending a special school that could cater for her educational needs. But the nearest suitable school was 45 minutes away and the journey was really stressful for Isla. She also found being in the new school triggered bad memories of her previous school experiences.

After two weeks, she had to leave because it was just too difficult for her. Now a teacher from the school visits home, but Isla can only manage a couple of hours each week.

It is basically where school comes to me and said, I have to go.

Which is better, I guess.

Do you think you'd go back to school?

Absolutely not.

Really?

No.

Her mum feels that a quicker diagnosis would have meant early access to the specialist help Isla needed and may have prevented her

developing such negative feelings about school.

You're stepping in her poo and wee!

Not far from Isla is the City of Bath and I went there to meet ten year old Harmony Rose. She lives with a mum, dad and her sister, Luna.

When Harmony was only ten months old, she became critically ill with a serious infection called meningitis.

Right shall we put your legs on?

Yeah.

Doctors decided the only way to save her life was to amputate her arms and legs.

She's made an incredible recovery, but her treatment is ongoing. Because she is still growing, Harmony regularly requires new prosthetics and she has to do daily physio exercises to help build a strength.

3, 2, 1. The ache!

Harmony has raised thousands of pounds for charity and received some major awards, including a Pride of Britain award in 2021.

Hi.

Come on in.

What are some of the everyday challenges that you face because of your disability?

Not being able to do stuff like other people can do. Like sometimes my friends go on fairground rides, I'm not actually allowed on them.

Yeah, that's the same with me. When I went to a theme park, they didn't let me on the rides because they thought my legs were going to just fall off.

What is the thing that annoys you the most about how you're treated by non-disabled people?

They assume I can't do stuff like some people assume I can't write, some people assume I can't draw, but I can and I'm actually really good at it. So please don't assume

I'm making Mummy so lucky - I'm giving you two pieces of bacon in your one.

I've got some on my face.

Thank you.

You're welcome.

What else is noisy when you're out and about staring, pointing, laughing. They laugh at me and they point to me and they stare at me. And I really don't like that. It makes me feel I'm the odd one out. And I don't like that because, well, I don't want to be the odd one out.

I want to be the same as everybody else, like with my big legs. That's the reason why I like wearing trousers, is you can't actually notice it they're prosthetic if I was my trousers.

I'm trying my best to walk in a line.

It's clear that nothing is going to stand in Harmony's this way. But how she is treated by some people does make her feel different, which can be quite upsetting and many disabled children say they're made to feel excluded or even isolated from society.

According to the Disabled Children's Partnership Report, only two in five disabled children feel they have enough friends with many reporting they have no friends at all.

Someone who knows exactly what it feels like to be isolated because of a disability is Eva Abley.

Hi, how are you?

I'm good, thank you.

In 2022, she reached the final of Britain's Got Talent with her hilarious comedy routine.

That made it competitive.

Eva has cerebral palsy, a lifelong condition that affects movement and coordination. Corrr!

Could you give us some examples of when people treat you differently because of your disability?

Definitely in school. No one wanted to pair up with me in class. They were embarrassed to sit next to me when I ate my lunch because of my wobbles. I think it was really very unfair. I didn't know what I'd done to deserve it.

Things got so bad that Eva had to leave school and was educated from home for a while.

Do you think teachers and students needs to be more aware of the effects of cerebral palsy or any disability that has on you?

There's the massive gap in knowledge that people are lacking, and I just think that because they never learned about the never been educated about it.

Eva was so determined to do something about the way she was treated, she created a talk that she now gives in schools called Spread The Kindness.

The aim of the talk is to help educate children on how to speak to and treat disabled people.

Hello, everyone. My name is Eva. Does anybody know what a disability is?

If you have a disability, you can't do certain things.

Oh that's a really good try. Maybe can do things, but in a different or adapted way.

I got a disability called cerebral palsy, but this doesn't stop me from doing anything.

Eva's talk was amazing, and it was informational about disabilities and kindness and how we should treat each other the same way, even if we're different or they have a disability.

I'll takeaway how we can spread kindness across the world and make sure that everyone is included, even if they have a disability, or that.

We wanted to know if the other children we'd been filming with for this program have had similar experiences to Eva. So we arranged a video call.

I really enjoy school, but then also sometimes I don't because sometimes I wear my short legs and receptions come up to me and I'm like, I'm taller than you, like, ha ha ha, I'm taller than you.

When I have PE, I would hear about all the cool things they did during it. And then I'm in a meeting room doing homework, which I find pretty excluding.

I mean, I know my own personal experience is that being excluded from sport and not being able to do sport is really annoying. Watching your friends do all this sport and then having fun and then you're kind of, you know, in the corner,

like all my friends at lunchtime are like on the monkey bars doing flips on them and I'm like, It's just really annoying cause I can't actually do that.

With my friendships, they're just so bad. I feel like ever since I told my friends I was autistic, I've really got less friends.

Just yesterday I was sitting in class and for no apparent reason, the friendship group got up and moved away from me. And it just, like, doesn't make sense to me.

The group all seem to share the feeling of being excluded or left out just because they are disabled.

But there are lots of organisations working hard to make disabled children feel more included in life.

I've come to see how these young people are using brand new prosthetics to help them play golf at the G4D Open, one of the biggest events in disability golf.

Nice and straight. There we go. brilliant.

How's the prosthetic arm helping you swing today?

It's been really good. It's helping use it with two hands.

If you don't have a prosthetic you have to scoop your back and you don't get as much power in your swing, and you don't get as much precision.

Why do you think events like this are important for disabled people?

It's important for them to experience what other people will experience.

And even though we might be a little different, I describe this is unique.

It's great to see how advanced prosthetics are making a difference.

I've lost!

And Eva has a plan that can make a difference too.

She's recording a video of her kindness talk that she hopes will be shown in schools to improve education around disability.

Now, I would like to tell you a bit about my cerebral palsy, and with the talk recorded

We've arranged for her to meet with Gillian Keegan, the Secretary of State for Education, to discuss getting it into schools.

About how you can help someone with the disability.

And that is fantastic really clear thought provoking. It's amazing.

Now, I believe you've been going into schools and doing this in person and this is a way of being able to spread that further

because it's going to take a long time to get to every school, right?

Yes. The aim of the video is I don't want anyone else to go for what I did at school.

So what was that? Are you happy to share?

Yes, I was ignored, I was picked on. They used to pick on how I ate, and they got so bad I had to leave school to become homeschooled. It made me severely depressed.

Can I just say you should be included. You shouldn't be bullied, and you should certainly never experience what you experience. And that should not happen in any of our schools. I mean, so sorry about that. A lot of this comes from people not being educated enough.

So what do you think of the idea of putting this video out there and educating kids generally on what this disability is?

I think videos and your materials and videos like this do help. It is a very important thing to educate people on. But what you're actually saying is you're trying to spread. It's spreading the kindness, right. And calling out. And there is an alternative.

Yeah.

Which, you know, you can start by being the kind person and that's the kind of the right thing to do and the cool thing to do. And that's that's, I think, a very, very important lesson.

Yeah.

Thank you for educating me, which you have. And both of you are doing fantastic work and shown brilliant leadership. And I look forward to continue to work with you to get the message through.

Thank you so much.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Eva's video will be available to schoolchildren all over the UK, which could really improve future awareness of disability.

But there's no doubt that lots more needs to be done to support disabled children.

Until that happens, George, Isla, Harmony, Eva and hundreds of thousands like them will have to continue their fight for the equality that they deserve.

My message would be don't stare, don't laugh, don't point. It's

alright to ask.

I want to see wheelchair users on books, TV shows, because then it would inspire other people to not stare at wheelchair users.

I just want to be treated like everyone else.

My motto is if you believe you can achieve.

We just want friends. They just want to be like everybody else. So include us, talk to us, and you realise how fun we are.