

HISTORY OF DISABILITY IN BRIEF

An outline of characteristics, attitudes, and practices toward people with disabilities from ancient times to the present. For an in-depth presentation of historical information visit the website of the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities: www.mncdd.org

Ancient Era 1500 B.C. — 475 A.D.

1. Language of the Times

- Inferior
- Idiot
- Fool

2. Solution for Disabilities

- Abandonment – legally required in Sparta to abandon “deformed & sickly” infants
- Death – Aristotle said, “...no deformed child shall live.”
- Use person as a plaything – court jester

Middle Ages, Renaissance & Reformation 476 A.D. - 1500 A.D.

1. Cruel Treatment

- “Cities of the Damned”— made up of “deviants” such as madmen and incurables
- Ships of Fools—people with disabilities were put on a ship and displayed from port to port; eventually abandoned
- Begging was a necessity

2. Role of Religion

- “Children of a Caring God”—belief of Koran, Confucius, & Zoroaster
- “Filled with Satan”—Martin Luther’s belief

The 17th and 18th Centuries

Age of Confusion: Seeds of Change

1. Pervasive Attitudes

- Idiot Cages—used to “keep people with disabilities out of trouble,” but also for entertaining townspeople
- Thomas Malthus—advocated elimination of “defective” people

2. The Enlightenment

- Influential thinkers such as John Locke & Jean Jacques Rousseau: persons with intellectual disabilities are capable of learning

- Education of “deaf-mutes”
- Philip Pinel — first to say mentally deranged were diseased rather than sinful or immoral

1800-1950: The Rise of Institutions

1. Common Practices of 19th Century
 - “Warning out”—the opposite of the welcome mat: newcomer with disabilities was not welcome in town
 - “Passing on”—transporting people with disabilities via cart to the next town
2. 1848: Beginning of Public Institutions
 - Created to train, teach, socialize and self-help
 - Dorothea Dix and Maria Montessori were pioneers
3. 1875: Shift in Focus
 - With large numbers, institutions began to focus on life as a resident, not on education for living on the outside
 - “Protection” of the person with a disability shifted to “suspicion”
 - Segregation and sterilization
4. Language of the Times
 - Idiotic
 - Feeble-minded
 - Unteachable idiots
 - Moron
5. Holocaust
 - 100,000 children & adults with disabilities were killed
 - Considered morally bad or genetically flawed

The Awakening 1950-1980

1. The Power of Parents
 - 1940-1950: strong national movement—”The retarded can be helped.”
 - 1950’s: international community sought same rights
 - 30 years of parent advocacy focused on winning civil and legal rights for their children
 - 1960-1970: state institutions, community service, education, job opportunities, legislation improved
 - Famous people become public about family members with disabilities; no longer hidden:
 - President Kennedy’s sister Rosemary
 - Pearl Buck’s daughter Carol
 - Dale Evans’ daughter Robin

2. The Independent Living Movement

- **Ed Roberts, Judy Heuman and other self advocates emerge as leaders of the disability rights movement and promote independent living philosophy.**

Current Life for People with Disabilities

Key Legislative Advancements

- **1965: Elementary & Secondary Education Act: Funding was made available to educate the “educationally deprived”**
- **1973: Section 504 of the Rehab Act: People with disabilities are protected from discrimination in all federal programs**
- **1975: Education for all Handicapped Children Act: Amended in the 90’s and is now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This law ensures that public schools offer all children with disabilities a free appropriate education in the least restrictive environment appropriate to their individual needs**
- **1990: Americans with Disabilities Act: Goal is full participation and independence for persons with disabilities**
- **2001: The Olmstead Supreme Court Decision interpreting the ADA : “The Federal Government must assist States and localities to implement swiftly the Olmstead decision, so as to help ensure that all Americans have the opportunity to live close to their families and friends, to live more independently, to engage in productive employment, and to participate in community life.”**

Language of the Times

- **Person with a disability**
- **Child with Down Syndrome**
- **Uses a wheelchair**

Significant Progress Towards Inclusiveness and Accessibility

- **Schools**
- **Recreation Areas**
- **Restaurants**
- **Hospitals**
- **Stores**
- **Public Transportation**
- **Housing**
- **Workplace**