

Abstract

No recent studies regarding the prevalence of special needs in children have been done.

None identification of special needs early leads to snowballing effect.

The objective of the study was to determine the prevalence of selected special needs among children aged 5 to 10 years and some associated factors among selected variables in Biyagama Medical Officer of Health area.

This was a community based descriptive cross sectional study and was conducted from 01/09/2007 to 31/09/2007. Simple random sampling was used and 1120 subjects were identified for the study and 1072 participated in the study.

Interviewer administered structured questionnaire based on questionnaire used in US Census 2000 consisting of a majority of close ended questions was used for the data collection. Ten pre interns were used as data collectors. Data was analyzed using SPSS 13 computer package.

Thirteen point six percent (95% CI: 11.55-15.65) of the subjects were having special needs. Twelve point seven percent (95% CI: 10.7-14.6) of them were learning disabilities. Out of the 12.7 % that were having learning disabilities, 4% (95% CI: 3.76-4.24) were having specific learning disabilities and 10.6% (95% CI: 8.75-12.44) Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD). One point two percent (95% CI: 1.13 – 1.27) were having blindness/visual impairments, 1.1% (95% CI: 1.03-1.16) speech impairment, 0.7% (95% CI: 0.65-0.74) deafness/hearing impairments and, 0.5% (95% CI: 0.47-0.53) inability to ambulate effectively. Five of the children with special needs (3.4%) were having co- morbidities. Study findings are compatible with available literature except for the speech and hearing impairments and inability to ambulate effectively which were below the global prevalence. Prevalence of visual impairment

was quite high by global standards but was within what has been reported for the region. Prevalence of special needs (learning disabilities) declined with advancing age of the study subjects.

Only 80.9% of the children who require special schooling were attending school. Sixty seven point one percent of the caregivers believed that the child does not need any intervention.

Study shows strong association of special needs (which consists mainly of learning disabilities) and low family income ($p < 0.001$), low father's educational level ($p < 0.001$), subjects that received special care immediately after birth ($p < 0.001$), more than two siblings ($P < 0.001$).

Statistically significant associations were present with consanguinity ($p = 0.020$), delivery types other than normal delivery ($p = 0.04$), Presence of special needs in siblings ($P = 0.03$)

Prematurity ($p = 0.78$) and ethnicity ($p = 0.73$) were not found to be significantly associated with prevalence of special needs in the study subjects. Buddhism is shown to be associated with higher prevalence of special needs in study subjects ($p = 0.04$).

1. Screening tests at an early age to detect special needs is an urgent need.
2. Programmes for awareness building in mothers, teachers and general public are required.
3. Specialist services involved in the management of the children with special needs, rehabilitation and treatment facilities should be made available.
4. Special schools need to be improved.