# Parents' Perception of Social Skills in Children with Learning Disabilities in Abuja, Nigeria

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**Abstract**
The relationship between a child and his or her family environment is perhaps the greatest influence on a child's life. Developments of social skills started at home through interaction with parents. This study examined parents' perceptions of social skills in children with learning disabilities in Abuja, Nigeria. The participants of this study were 314 female and male parents of children with learning disabilities selected from 20 inclusive basics schools across the six Area Councils of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Abuja. Parents' perceptions of the social skills in children with learning disabilities were measured using the Social Skills Questionnaire (SSQ-P, Spence, 1995). A t-test was used to determine the difference in female and male parents' perceptions of the social skills of children with learning disabilities. The result showed that female and male parents' perception of the social skills in children with learning disabilities was moderate. There was no significant difference in the perception of social skills of children with learning disabilities based on the gender of the parents. Given that parents have rated the social skills of their children with learning disabilities as moderate, it is important for intervention programs and policies to prioritize supporting parents and schools in fostering appropriate social skills and preventing social skill deficits in children.
**Keywords:** Parents, Perception, Social Skills, Children with Learning Disabilities, Inclusive School.

**Introduction**
Children with learning disabilities (LDs) represent one of the more difficult developmental variants resulting from compound anomalies with discrepancies between potential and actual achievements. It is a neurological condition where a person's brain is not arranged normally, disrupting how they receive and process information (Aminu, 2021). Cognitive deficits associated with specific learning disorders (SLD) include problems with attention, memory, and processing of information slowly. From the search efforts and contacts made to the relevant agencies of the government, there is no officially identified number of children with specific learning disabilities in Nigeria. Nonetheless, LDs among children were estimated to

be six million in a report by Okoye (2014), compiled by Helping Hands Special School, a non-governmental organization in Nigeria.

The ability to relate to and communicate with others through gestures, body language and physical appearance is known as social skills. Children with LDs may experience problems comprehending gestures, interacting with others, considering other people's perspectives, and demonstrating appropriate behaviors (Kaya & Kaval, 2022). As a result, they find it difficult to communicate and form meaningful relationships with those around them (Kaya & Kaval, 2022). Children with learning disabilities have difficulties in social understanding, leading to problems in social functioning and are generally perceived as antisocial or exhibit inappropriate behavior during interactions with peers (Smogorzewska et al., 2019). These variations might make it more difficult for them to establish and maintain social relationships, which hinder their ability to become highly competent social beings (Alghazo et al., 2023).

Furthermore, lack of social skills leads to difficulties that can eventually lead to depression, social anxiety, loneliness, and alcoholism (Jacob et al., 2021; Kwan et al., 2020). Poor social skills are usually caused by children with learning difficulties being afraid of standing out and becoming the target of jokes, bullying and, in the worst cases, rejection (Davies et al., 2014). Research efforts have observed that children with learning disabilities may be socially deficient in some basic social skills such as communication, problem-solving, interpersonal skills, and responsibility (Jacob et al., 2021). In Abuja, Nigeria, inclusive basic schools were established to create an environment where children with different needs can learn together. However, children with learning disabilities face unique challenges that require careful assessment and understanding by parents and teachers.

It takes more work and involvement from parents to raise a child with a disability. This includes ongoing medical care and rehabilitation that must be provided for the child until they reach adolescence and adulthood (Olabisi et. al., 2022). Parental perceptions, influenced by various factors including cultural expectations and personal experiences, can significantly impact the educational and social outcomes of children with learning disabilities. Differences in these perceptions between mothers and fathers may affect the consistency and effectiveness of support provided to these children at home and school. Thus, assessing social skills in children with learning disabilities is critical because these skills significantly impact their ability to integrate and thrive in inclusive educational environments. In short, parental perceptions, both mothers' and fathers', play an essential role in shaping these children's social skills.

**Parents' Perception and Child's Social Skill**
According to research by Caplan et al. (2019), a child's social skills are shaped by the parent-child relationships in their early years. A child may find it difficult to develop the necessary social skills later in life if they are denied appropriate interaction and integration in their home environment during this critical developmental stage (Caplan et al. 2019, Hukkelberg et al. 2019). Lacking social skills can cause social isolation, lower levels of acceptability from classmates and teachers, and serious social disadvantage and exclusion (Mulvey et al. 2017).

A successful transition to adulthood for young children with learning disabilities depends heavily on social skills, a fundamental component of the family domain (Buckley et

al, 2020; Henniger & Taylor, 2014). The relationship between a child and his family environment is perhaps the most influential in a child's life. Even as peer relationships become more important in adolescence there is likely no other individual on whom the child is more reliant (Barger et al., 2019). Children spend more time with their families than they do in school. Parental perception and roles are positively and significantly linked to child adjustment across all major dimensions of child development related to educational and developmental outcomes such as achievement, engagement, motivation, social, emotional, and delinquency (Lanjekar et al., 2022). Children with LDs are no exceptions in this regard. Parental perceptions, shaped by their attachment to their children, can significantly impact their educational experiences and outcomes. Parents who perceive their children's social skills positively are more likely to be supportive and involved in their education, contributing to a better learning environment and higher academic and social achievements (Eden et al., 2024). Parent's beliefs and attitudes have a great influence on children's active play behaviour and specifically their social skill development (Loprinzi & Trost, 2010).

According to Barger et al (2019), there is a clear connection between the parent-child relationship and the achievement outcomes of children who experience warm relationships with their parents. In other words, a strong parent-child relationship promotes the development of high social skills in children with learning difficulties. Therefore, the perception and role of parents cannot be underestimated. Children who enjoy strong bonds with their parents usually experience positive effects and significant improvements in their relationship skills and demonstrate high self-esteem and adequate satisfaction (Jigyel et al., 2019). Positive relationships within the family system and the teaching of social skills in inclusive learning environments are crucial for supporting the development of social skills in children with learning disabilities (Mahoney et al. 2020).

The Social Cognitive Theory by Albert Bandura (1986), is one of the most significant theories explaining how parents' perceived the social skills in children with learning disabilities. This theory focuses on how individuals learn through observation, imitation, and modeling, and it highlights the role of cognitive processes in social interactions. Parents observe their children in social settings and compare their behaviors to those of peers. They often use these observations to gauge their child's social skills. If a child with a learning disability struggles with social interactions, parents might perceive these struggles more negatively because they observe deviations from typical social behavior. Parents' perceptions of their child's social skills are also influenced by their own beliefs about their ability to help their child succeed. If parents believe they lack the skills or knowledge to support their child, they might perceive their child's social abilities more negatively.

Parents often model social behaviors for their children. If children with learning disabilities have less exposure to positive social modeling or struggle to interpret social cues, parents might perceive their social skills as inadequate. This perception can impact how parents support their child and how they view their child's social development. In addition, parents provide feedback and reinforcement based on their observations. If a child with a learning disability shows difficulties in social situations, the feedback might be more critical or focused on areas of concern, influencing both the parent's and the child's perceptions of social skills. Overall, Social Cognitive Theory provides a framework for understanding how

parents' observations, beliefs, and modeling affect their perceptions of their child's social skills, especially when the child has learning disabilities.

**The Difference in Perception of Social Skill in Children with Learning Disability**
Findings regarding the difference in the perception of children's social skills between parents were mixed. Smith and Adams (2017), found that parents generally perceive the social skills of their children with learning disabilities as moderate. Parents often have similar perceptions regardless of gender (Adamu & Bako, 2023; Adeoye & Owolabi, 2018; Nwachukwu & Ekpo, 2021; Smith & Adams, 2017). Both mothers and fathers have a balanced view of their children's social capabilities, which may be influenced by shared parental responsibilities, equal engagement in child-rearing and depending on how they were involved in school activities (Okechukwu & Agada, 2020; Okonkwo and Yakubu, 2022; Thompson & Green, 2020). However, Brown and Lee (2019), reported a significant difference between maternal and paternal perceptions. They found that mothers were more likely than fathers to have positive perceptions of their children's social skills, due to mothers' greater involvement in their children's daily activities.

Research indicates that while mothers and fathers generally exhibit similar strengths and weaknesses in their interactions with children who have learning disabilities, there are subtle differences. For instance, fathers tend to score higher in areas such as responsiveness, encouragement, and teaching when interacting with their sons, while mothers often engage more in affectionate behaviors (Roggman et al., 2004). Mothers also tend to spend more time in childcare activities compared to fathers, particularly on weekdays. This suggests that mothers may focus more on emotional support, whereas fathers might emphasize teaching and encouragement, which can shape their perceptions of their children's social skills.

Parental satisfaction and emotional responses also play a crucial role in shaping perceptions. Parents of children with learning disabilities often report lower levels of parenting satisfaction compared to those with typically developing children (Ahsan & Dewantoro, 2020). This dissatisfaction can stem from perceived challenges in their children's social relationships and overall motivation. Mothers, in particular, may experience heightened emotional distress due to societal stigma and the pressures of caregiving, which can lead to more negative perceptions of their children's social capabilities (Janikowski & Norvilitis, 2020). Studies show that mothers with higher educational attainment tend to score higher in areas such as encouragement and teaching, which may lead to more positive perceptions of their children's social skills (Roggman et al. 2004). Conversely, fathers' educational levels do not significantly correlate with their parenting behaviors, suggesting that mothers may be more proactive in seeking educational opportunities for their children, thereby fostering better social skills development.

In summary, while both mothers and fathers share similarities in their interactions with children with learning disabilities, they differ in their perceptions shaped by parenting behaviors, emotional responses, and educational backgrounds. Mothers often focus more on emotional support, while fathers may emphasize teaching and encouragement, leading to different perceptions of their children's social skills. These differences are not absolute and can vary widely depending on individual personalities, family dynamics, and cultural contexts. The key is recognizing that both parents' perspectives are valuable and can contribute to a

more comprehensive understanding of a child's social skills and needs. It can also help in tailoring interventions that support both parents in fostering their children's social development.

Despite the importance of parental involvement and perception, limited empirical studies focus on how mothers and fathers perceive the social skills of their children with learning disabilities in the context of inclusive education in Abuja. This knowledge gap limits the ability of educators, policymakers, and practitioners to develop targeted interventions that effectively engage parents and holistically support children's social development. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the parents' perception of the social skills of children with learning disabilities in inclusive schools in Abuja, Nigeria and whether there was a difference in perception of the social skills of the children based on the gender of the parents. Understanding these perceptions will provide valuable insight into how parents' views can be reconciled and used to improve educational strategies and outcomes for children with learning disabilities in inclusive environments in Abuja.

## Research Methodology

### Research Design
*This study adopted a cross-sectional research design with a quantitative research methodology to collect information about the level and difference in female and male parents' perceptions of the social skills of children with learning disabilities.*

### Participants
Participants were eligible for participation if they were mothers or fathers of children with learning disabilities between the ages of 12 and 18 years studying in inclusive basic schools in Abuja, Nigeria. A total of 314 female and male parents of children identified with learning disabilities from 20 inclusive basic schools covering the six area councils in Abuja participated as respondents of this study.

### Instrument
Data were collected using a self-administered structured questionnaire that assessed female and male parents' perceptions of the social skills of children with learning disabilities. The questionnaire included specific items related to children's social skills, rated based on a 3-point Likert scale (not true, sometimes true, mostly true) with assigned scores of 0, 1, 2. The Social Skill Questionnaire (SSQ-P) was developed by Spence (1995). The maximum score was 60 and the lowest was 0. Based on this scoring system, a score of 0-39 was rated as a low perception of social skill, a score between 40-46 was rated as a moderate perception of social skill, and a score between 47-60 was rated as a high perception of social skill (Gresham & Elliott, 2008). Items in the scale included (a) Listening to other people's points of view during arguments, (b) Making requests from parents in a polite way, (c) Controlling his/her temper when he/she loses in a game or competition. The Cronbach's Alpha ($\alpha$) coefficient of the scale is 0.97 implying reliability in measuring parents' perception of social skills of children with disabilities.

### Research Procedures
The appropriate authorities approved the data collection process: the Ethics Committee of Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Education Secretariat, Abuja,

Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Universal Basic Education Board and the Principals of the inclusive schools involved in the study. A total of 20 inclusive basic schools from the six Area Councils in Abuja were involved in this study.

Parents were identified and recruited via their children with learning disabilities in each school. Informed consent forms were distributed with questionnaires to parents selected through a lottery method and agreed to participate in this study. A total sample size of 322 questionnaires was distributed to all schools. In each of the schools, the questionnaires were distributed to the students with the assistance of the teachers. Students took the questionnaires home with the instructions that only one parent should respond. The confidentiality of the information was assured. The same process was repeated in all the 20 selected schools. From the 322-questionnaire distributed, 314 questionnaires were returned giving rise to a 97.5% return rate. Before conducting the actual study, the pilot study was carried out to determine the validity of the questionnaire in three inclusive basic schools in the neighboring States of Nasarawa, Kaduna and Niger. 46 parents participated in the pilot test. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.978 which merits the validity of the instrument used to measure parents' perception of social skills of children with learning disabilities.

*Statistical Analyses*
Descriptive analysis was used to measure the parents' perception of social skills of their children with learning disabilities and, a T-test was used to determine the difference in perception of social skills of children with learning disabilities based on the parent's gender.

**Results**
*Level of Parents' Perception of Social Skills of Children with Learning Disabilities*
Table 1 showed that 99 (31.5%) female parents reported moderate perception of the social skills of their children with learning disabilities followed by 41 (13.1%) reported a high level and 35 (11.1%) showed a low level. As for male parents, 61 (19.4%) reported a moderate level, followed by 49 (15.6%) showed a high level and 29 (9.2%) showed a low perception of the social skills of their children with learning disabilities. This suggests a general trend where perceptions of the social skills of their children with learning disabilities from female and male parents converge towards a moderate assessment. Parents adjudged that their children with learning disabilities can function on social skills moderately. This indicates that children with learning disabilities have a measure of social skills that help them to function in school, home and the community where they live. Hukkelberg et al. (2019) reported that while dealing with children with learning disabilities deficient in social skills, parents are an important resource for teachers; for example, by being involved in school activities and having regular contact with teachers, they can let teachers know about their children, their characteristics, cultural background, resources, needs and past experiences, thus promoting teachers' competence and knowledge regarding their children with learning disabilities.

Table 1

*Parents' Perception of Social Skills of Children with Learning Disabilities (n=314)*

| Variables | Parents | | Total |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | Female (%) | Male (%) | |
| Low (0-39) | 35(11.1) | 29(9.2) | 64(20.4) |
| Moderate (40-46) | 99(31.5) | 61(19.4) | 160(51) |
| High (47-60) | 41(13.1) | 49(15.6) | 90(28.7) |
| Total (n) | 175(55.7) | 139(44.3) | 314(100) |
| Mean | 43.31 | 43.78 | |
| SD | 5.06 | 4.71 | |

**The Difference in Perception of Social Skills of Children with Learning Disabilities between Female and Male Parents**

Table 2 shows no significant difference between female and male parents in the perception of the social skills of their children with learning disabilities. The mean perception score for women was 43.31 ± 5.06, while for men it was 43.78 ± 4.71. The t-value was -0.853 and the p-value was 0.394, showing no significant difference in the perception of social skills of the children with learning difficulties. These results are consistent with previous research (Adamu & Bako, 2023; Adeoye & Owolabi, 2018; Nwachukwu & Ekpo, 2021; Smith & Adams, 2017), which found that parents generally perceive the social skills of their children with learning disabilities as moderate. Parents often have similar perceptions regardless of gender, highlighting the consistency of parental observations (Smith & Adams, 2017). Both mothers and fathers have a balanced view of their children's social skills, which can be influenced by shared parental responsibilities and equal involvement in child-rearing (Johnson & Musa, 2019; Thompson & Green, 2020).

Table 2

*The Difference in Perception of Social Skills of Children with Learning Disabilities based on the Parent's Gender*

| Gender | n | Mean | SD | df | t-value | p-value |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Female | 175 | 43.31 | 5.06 | 312 | -0.853 | 0.394 |
| Male | 139 | 43.78 | 4.71 | | | |

**Note:** SD = standard deviation

**Limitation of Study**

One limitation of this study is that the respondents are parents of children with learning disabilities who are not parents to the same child. This lack of shared parenting context means that each respondent's perspective is shaped by their own unique experiences and challenges, which may not directly reflect the specific dynamics or issues faced by the children of other respondents. As a result, the findings might be influenced by individual differences in parenting practices, expectations, and perceptions, rather than providing a unified view of social skills or developmental issues applicable to a broader population of children with learning disabilities. Future research could benefit from including a more integrated approach, such as comparing perceptions between parents of the same child or exploring how parental perspectives might vary across different types of learning disabilities and educational settings.

## Conclusion

The development of social skills in children is a crucial foundation for their future social interactions and overall life success. For school-age children, particularly those with learning disabilities, refining these skills is essential as it supports the formation of positive relationships and enhances their social integration. This study found that both fathers and mothers perceived their children with learning disabilities as having moderate social skills. Importantly, there was no significant difference between the perceptions of fathers and mothers regarding their children's social skills. This result indicates that both parents' viewpoints should be equally considered in future research and when designing interventions aimed at improving social skills for children with learning disabilities. Recognizing and incorporating diverse parental perspectives can help in developing more comprehensive and effective strategies to support these children's social development.

## Implications

The current study contributes to the growing body of literature suggesting that parental perceptions of social skills in their children with learning disabilities are generally moderate and do not significantly differ between mothers and fathers. This implies that interventions aiming to enhance social skills in children with learning disabilities should consider involving both parents equally, given their similar perspectives. The findings imply that interventions aimed at enhancing social skills in children with learning disabilities can be designed without bias towards either parent's perception. This equal consideration can lead to more holistic and effective strategies in inclusive education settings.

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