



## EMPATHY THE CRUCIAL ELEMENT FOR SUCCESSFUL SUPPORTING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

## EMPATIJA KLJUČNI ELEMENT ZA USPJEŠNU PODRŠKU OSOBAMA S INVALIDITETOM

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### ABSTRACT

Empathy, the ability to understand other people, plays a key role in successfully supporting people with disabilities in their daily lives. Although in general most people are empathic, it is usually necessary to release empathy. This is most simply achieved by means of empathy tests that simulate different forms of disability and the difficulties that disabled people experience in their daily activities due to this impairment. The paper describes simple tests and their impact on changing attitudes towards people with disabilities and ways of supporting them.

**Key words:** empathy, people with disabilities, support, education.

### SAŽETAK

Empatija, sposobnost da razumijemo druge osobe igra ključnu ulogu pri uspješnoj podršci osoba sa invaliditetom u njihovom svakodnevnom životu. Mada je generalno većina osoba empatična obično je potrebne osloboditi empatiju. To se najjednostavnije postiže pomoću empatijskih testova koji simuliraju različite oblike invaliditeta i teškoće koje osobe sa invaliditetom zbog tog oštećenja u svakodnevnim aktivnostima. U radu su opisani jednostavni testovi te njihov utjecaj na promjenu odnosa do osoba sa invaliditetom i načina njihove podrške.

**Ključne riječi:** empatija, osobe sa invaliditetom, podrška, edukacija.

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## INTRODUCTION

The term empathy is relatively new. It was introduced in the aesthetics at the beginning of the twentieth century as one's own attitudes and feelings into a work of art or a natural phenomenon. However in the middle of 20th century empathy's definition began to shift as some psychologists turned their attention to the science of social relations. Today emotion researchers generally define empathy as the ability to sense other people's emotions, coupled with the ability to imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling. In the 21st century empathy plays an increasingly important role in the development of society. So D. Pink includes empathy among the six senses that play a significant role in shaping our worldview and way of thinking (Pink, 2005). S. Sinek, acclaims that empathy—the ability to recognize and share other people's feelings—is the most important instrument in a leader's toolbox. (Sinek n.d.) J. Rifkin claims that the complex problems of today's civilization, global warming, pandemics, and increasing the quality of life can only be solved with empathy (Rifkin, 2010). By supporting the sports activities of people with disabilities, we found that if we are empathetic, we will better understand the difficulties of those people when performing those activities and therefore provide them with more effective help. Regardless of the fact that it has been established that empathy appears at an early age in children (Light et al., 2009) and that a lack of empathy is related to brain damage or psychiatric diseases (Xiaosi et al, 2012), people do not show empathy as it is expected. In our opinion, it is not because we are afraid, as M. Angelou says, “I think we all have empathy. We may not have enough courage to display it” (Angelou, 2020) but because of focusing on our own problems, we do not see the problems of others. In fact, it is necessary to arouse such thinking and release our innate empathy. The easiest way to do this is to simulate the problems faced by people with disabilities in their daily activities. This is confirmed by the experience of a swimming coach for people with disabilities who says the following: "At the swimming festival in Rijeka, I took part in empathy tests. First we swam only with our legs, and then only with our hands, which was not difficult. But when we were told to swim with only one arm and only one leg, I thought that I had never considered the difficulties of disabled persons I am teaching to swim. And I must admit that after that event, I try to understand the difficulties of others." If we understand the difficulties of others, if we metaphorically put on the shoes of others, we can effectively help them. Empathy tests (simulation of conditions that show the difficulties people with disabilities have in their daily activities) are an excellent tool if we want to awaken empathy.

## EMPATHY TESTS

It is very easy to simulate the problems that people with disabilities have. So if we want to feel what difficulties people with disabilities have when swimming, it is enough to try to do the following exercises:

- 1) Walking around the pool with eyes closed with an escort.
- 2) Swimming in all four techniques,
  - swimming without one arm,
  - swimming without both arms,
  - swimming without one leg,
  - swimming without both legs,

- swimming without one arm and/or part of the arm and one leg - same and different side,
- swimming without one arm and/or part of an arm and both legs,
- swimming without one leg and both arms and/or part/parts of the arms (we hold onto the shoulders with our palms),
- swimming with our eyes closed,
- swimming with spread fingers,
- swimming with our hands closed.

### 3) Start

- next to the starting block with two, one leg or eyes closed (pay attention to the depth of the pool),
- sitting from the starting block onto the head,
- from the starting block with one leg,
- for back start with one hand.

### 4) Turn and finish

- with one arm,
- without both arms,
- with a non-functional leg.
- with non-functional two legs
- with closed eyes.

Empathy tests for swimming are primarily intended for swimming coaches and teachers, who work with people with disabilities. However, it is important to arouse empathy among people who do not work directly with people with disabilities.

We performed the following test (Selimović et al., 2015) in schools and businesses:

- A blindfolded person tries to assemble a given figure from its parts.
- We guide the blindfolded person to move from one part of the room to another.
- A person with normal vision is given prescription glasses.
- We try to communicate with a person with ear plugs.
- We give the person a text in which the letters **b** are replaced by **p** and letters **d** by **b** and ask them to read it aloud.
- We ask that they tie their shoes with one hand

Videos of individual tests are available at (Train4inclusive, 2022). After completing the tests, we asked the participants the following questions:

- Do you have/had contacts with people with disabilities?
- Do you know what empathy is?
- Have you ever thought of putting yourself in another person's shoes?
- Would you like to learn more about empathy?
- Would you volunteer in non-governmental organizations that support people with disabilities?
- Would you work with disabled people in your company?
- Would you hire a person with a disability?

Mark how much you agree with the following statements.

- After the exercises, I changed my opinion about people with disabilities
- If they were to perform empathy tests, it would change the attitude towards people with disabilities
- Carrying out empathy tests would contribute to the inclusion of people with disabilities.

The analysis of the responses showed that the majority of participants believe that the tests changed their opinion about people with disabilities. The participants assessed that the implementation of such experiments increased the inclusion of people with disabilities, increased the involvement of volunteers in the work of organizations that support people with disabilities.

Additionally in the companies, the participants showed their willingness to work with and employ people with disabilities.

Carrying out empathy tests in schools indicates that it is important to introduce empathy classes in educational institutions as has been done in Denmark (Morning Future, 2019). Since 1993 Denmark mandated empathy classes as part of their school curriculum. Starting in Kindergarten, Danish kids learn to share and solve their problems with classmates. In Danish schools an hour a week is dedicated to the “Klassens tid”, an empathy lesson for students aged 6 to 16 years. Because of systematic teaching empathy, Denmark is consistently among the top three happiest countries in the world and one of the best places to work in Europe.

## CONCLUSION

Analyzing the results of the workshops on empathy realized using empathy tests we conclude that:

- Empathy is important factor in the process of integration of people with disabilities in society
- It is easy to organize experiments in which participants will understand the every day problems of people with disabilities.
- It will be useful to organize such type of workshops in educational institutions starting from kindergarten at least once per year in each classroom.
- Empathy taught is extremely important for the successful work of institutions that support people with disabilities.
- Empathy experiments can increase the number of volunteers in NGOs, increase employment of people with disabilities, reduce the violence and bullying in schools.

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