

A Study of mental retardation in children in Dar es Salaam

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Mental retardation is not a disease or a single entity. It is manifested by slow, incomplete maturation, impaired learning ability and poor social adjustment which happens during developmental period^{1,2,3,4}. The commonly used definition is that by the American Academy of Mental Deficiency (AAMD) which states that mental retardation is significant subaverage general intellectual functioning existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifest during developmental period.⁵ This is further explained as a score on the standard tests that would be lower than that obtained by 97 to 98 percent of persons of same age meaning that certain individuals fail to meet standards of independence and social responsibility expected of the age and cultural group. There is failure to learn basic academic skills and participate in appropriate social group activities. All these should be observable during childhood. Problems of similar nature manifested only in adulthood would be classified as mental illness, not mental retardation.⁵ It should be pointed out that what is being stressed in this definition is adaptive behavior, intellectual subnormality and developmental period.^{5,6} In the past various synonyms of mental retardation have been used like mental subnormality, mental deficiency, mental handicap, mental deficit and amentia.^{2,6,7,8,9,10,11} However, mental retardation has gained more use in the United States of America than in England where mental subnormality is still maintained.^{2,6} Intelligence has always been difficult to define. When grouped together, four acceptable classes of definition have always emerged namely biological, psychological, operational and development.¹² Other basic approaches used to define intelligence have been based on intelligence being the ability to adapt to the environment. It has also been taken as an ability to carry on abstract thinking or regarded on global terms.¹³ Binet and Simon while developing their intelligence scale considered the nature of intelligence as having goal direction to mental process involved. They also considered it to involve the ability to show adaptive solution and selectivity of judgment and criticism of choices. Intelligence as defined by Wechsler in 1949 as being aggregate of global capacity of an individual to act purposefully to think rationally and to deal effectively with the environment is still a valid and useful definition.¹⁴ Intelligence is therefore the capacity to comprehend relation.¹⁴ Intelligence is therefore the capacity to comprehend relations, the ability to think and solve problems and to adjust to new solutions.¹⁵