

# CATEGORIES OF DIVERSE DISABILITIES

There is no one universally acceptable approach to describing categories of disabilities. The categories below incorporate terms often found in special education, disability rights, and medical literature. It is important to remember that within each category of disability there are differences between individuals in the type, degree, and impact of their disability. In addition, a person may have more than one disability.

## **CONGENITAL DISABILITIES**

The term “congenital disability” refers to an irregularity present at birth, which may or may not be due to genetic factors. Examples are Spina Bifida and Cerebral Palsy.

## **ACQUIRED DISABILITIES**

Acquired disabilities result from accident or disease after birth.

## **PHYSICAL DISABILITIES**

A physical disability means a physical condition that significantly interferes with at least one major life activity of an individual. This category includes anatomical loss or musculoskeletal, neurological, respiratory or cardiovascular impairment. Physical disabilities can be either congenital or acquired after birth as a result of accident or disease. Examples of physical disabilities include orthopedic impairments, health impairments such as a heart conditions, rheumatic fever, asthma, hemophilia, and leukemia, motor coordination/manipulation, traumatic brain injury, and mobility impairments.

## **SENSORY DISABILITIES**

The term “sensory disability” is generally used when referring to vision or hearing impairments. Subgroups under these headings include deafness, hard of hearing, blindness, visual impairment, or deaf-blindness.

### **Hearing Impairment**

The term “hearing impairment” is often used to describe a wide range of hearing losses, including deafness. Deafness may be viewed as a hearing impairment so severe that an individual cannot understand what is being said even with a hearing aid. In contrast, an individual with a hearing loss can generally respond to auditory stimuli, including speech. Hearing loss and deafness affect individuals of all ages and may occur at any time from infancy through old age.

### **Visual Impairments**

The terms partially sighted, low vision, legally blind, and totally blind are used in the educational context to describe students with visual impairments. “Partially sighted” indicates some type of visual problem has resulted in a need for special education. “Low

vision” generally refers to a severe visual impairment, not necessarily limited to distance vision. Low vision applies to all individuals with sight who are unable to read the newspaper at a normal viewing distance, even with the aid of eyeglasses or contact lenses. “Legally blind” indicates that a person has less than 20/200 vision in the better eye or a very limited field of vision. Totally blind individuals have no vision and must rely on non-visual modes of communication. Eye disorders leading to visual impairments include retinal degeneration, albinism, cataracts, glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy, congenital disorders, and infection.

### **Deaf-Blindness**

Deaf-Blindness is a category of disability involving a combination of hearing and visual impairments causing severe communication, developmental, and educational problems. Students with deaf-blindness usually receive specialized services as they cannot effectively be accommodated in programs specifically designed for students who are deaf or students who are blind.

## **DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES**

A developmental disability is a severe, chronic disability of an individual 5 years of age or older that:

- is attributable to a mental or physical impairment or combination of both;
- is evident before an individual reaches the age of 22;
- is likely to continue indefinitely;
- results in substantial functional limitations in three or more areas of major life activity;
- reflects an individual’s need for long-term coordinated services and supports.

Examples of specific conditions that fall within this category include Autism, Mental Retardation and Cerebral Palsy.

## **COGNITIVE DISABILITIES**

Cognitive disability involves the brain’s inability to process, retrieve, store and manipulate information. Cognitive disability refers to impairments to attention, orientation, memory, problem solving, judgment, information processing (reading, writing, mathematics) and behavior. A cognitive impairment is defined as “any disorder requiring special attention to or alternate methods for communicating concepts and instructions...”

### **Mental Retardation**

Mental retardation is a term used when a person has certain limitations in mental functioning and in skills such as communicating, taking care of him or herself, and social skills. These limitations will cause a child to learn and develop more slowly than a typical child. Children with mental retardation may take longer to learn to speak, walk, and take care of their personal needs such as dressing or eating. They are likely to have trouble learning in school. They will learn, but it will take them longer. There may be some things they cannot learn.

## **Learning Disabilities**

Learning disabilities are considered a disorder in one or more of the psychological processes involved in understanding or using spoken or written language or in processing information. This term includes such conditions as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia.

There are many conflicting theories about what causes learning disabilities and how many there are. Learning disabilities may impair an individual's ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations. It is important to remember that there is a high degree of interrelationship among the areas of learning. Therefore, youth with learning disabilities may exhibit a combination of characteristics. These problems may mildly, moderately, or severely impair the learning process.

## **Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD)**

AD/HD is a condition that can make it hard for a person to sit still, control behavior, and pay attention. These difficulties usually begin before the person is 7 years old. However, these behaviors may not be noticed until the child is older. Boys are three times more likely than girls to have AD/HD. There are three main symptoms of AD/HD. These are:

- Problems with paying attention,
- Being very active (called hyperactivity), and
- Acting before thinking (called impulsivity).

Doctors do not know just what causes AD/HD. However, researchers who study the brain believe that some people with AD/HD do not have enough of certain chemicals (called neurotransmitters) in their brain. These chemicals help the brain control behavior.

## **Traumatic brain injury**

Traumatic brain injury is defined in special education law as “an acquired injury to the brain caused by an external physical force, resulting in total or partial functional disability or psychosocial impairment, or both, that adversely affects a child's educational performance. The term applies to head injuries that impair one or more areas, such as cognition; language; memory; attention; reasoning; abstract thinking; judgment; problem-solving; sensory, perceptual, and motor abilities; psycho-social behavior; physical functions; information processing; and speech.” The term is not used to describe brain injuries that are congenital or degenerative.

## **Emotional Disturbance**

Many terms are used to describe emotional, behavioral or mental disorders. Currently, students with such disorders are categorized as having an “emotional disturbance,” which is defined under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as “...a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects educational performance—

- An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors;
- An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers;

- Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances;
- A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression; or
- A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.

As defined by the IDEA, the term “emotional disturbance” includes schizophrenia but does not apply to children who are socially maladjusted.

## **MENTAL HEALTH & PSYCHIATRIC DISABILITIES**

Mental illness is a term that describes a broad range of mental and emotional conditions. Mental illness also refers to one portion of the broader ADA term “mental impairment,” and is different from other covered mental impairments such as mental retardation, organic brain damage, and learning disabilities. The term ‘psychiatric disability’ is used when mental illness significantly interferes with major life activities such as learning, thinking, communicating, and sleeping. The most common forms of mental illness are anxiety disorders, depressive disorders, and schizophrenia. The type, intensity and duration of symptoms vary from person to person.

Mental illness often develops between the ages of 18 and 25. This often means that post-secondary educational plans are disrupted. Because of the cyclic nature of many mental illnesses, individuals may function very well for months or years and then suddenly run into difficulty. Medications used for treatment can also reduce concentration, blur vision and induce physical problems like dry mouth, nausea, tremors and insomnia.

## **SPEECH AND LANGUAGE DISABILITIES**

Speech and language disorders refer to problems in communication and related areas such as oral motor function. These include simple sound substitutions, an inability to understand, or a physical inability to speak or eat. Examples include stuttering, impaired articulation, language impairment, or a voice impairment. Some causes of speech and language disorders include neurological disorders, brain injury, drug abuse, or physical impairments such as cleft lip or palate. Language disorders may be related to other disabilities such as mental retardation, autism, or cerebral palsy. Frequently, however, the cause is unknown.

Much of the information above is adapted from material developed by the following organizations. More information on specific disabilities can be found on their web sites.

National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities [www.nichcy.org](http://www.nichcy.org)  
LD Online [www.ldonline.com](http://www.ldonline.com)

National Mental Health Association [www.nmha.org](http://www.nmha.org)