

FACTSHEET



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Intellectual disability

What is intellectual disability?

A child with an intellectual disability learns and develops more slowly than other children. Intellectual disability affects a child's:

- intellectual skills (learning, reasoning, problem solving),
- adaptive behaviour (everyday social and practical skills such as eating, dressing and toileting).

This slower development is often identified in the preschool years as a global developmental delay. It may also be first identified during the early school years, when a child's learning is noted to be slower than their peers. The level of disability can vary and be classed as "mild", "moderate", "severe" or "profound". Around the world different terms are used for intellectual disability, for example in the UK professionals may talk of a child having a "learning disability".

How is a child diagnosed with intellectual disability?

Children vary in their rate of development. If you have any concerns about your child's development it is a good idea to get them seen early. Talk to your early childhood nurse, teacher, family doctor or paediatrician.

For a child to be diagnosed as having an intellectual disability, they will need a formal assessment, which is done by a psychologist or a school counsellor. This involves gathering information about a child from their parents, child-care centre or school, therapists and doctor, as well as observation and interaction with the child. Formal intellectual (IQ) testing may include a series

of tasks such as naming pictures, completing puzzles and answering questions.

What can be done to help?

Children with an intellectual disability will learn and develop new skills, but at their own pace. They will often need more time and practice than other children of the same age. Once a diagnosis of an intellectual disability is made, a child may get extra support at school and home, to help them learn to their best potential. There are many options for education including additional support in a mainstream class, a specific unit in a mainstream school or a school specially designed for children with intellectual disabilities. Speech therapists, occupational therapists and psychologists can give extra support at school or at home.

Children with intellectual disabilities are all different. Some will need support in living independently in the community, others will live independent lives with only some difficulties in reading and writing.

Having your child diagnosed with an intellectual disability can be upsetting for your family. You may feel that you need to make different plans for the future. Help is available and you can discuss your concerns and options with your family doctor and your child's school.

All children have their own strengths and weaknesses. Building self esteem is important for your child's confidence to learn new skills

What causes intellectual disability?

There are many possible causes for children having intellectual disabilities. Causes include:

- genetic conditions– for example Trisomy 21 (Down syndrome) or Fragile X Syndrome
- an injury to the head or brain
- an infection, such as meningitis
- chronic illnesses
- drug/ medication use before the baby is born
- problems around the time of birth

It is important that your child be assessed by your family doctor or paediatrician to discuss a possible cause and other associated conditions.

What support is there?

Many services can provide support and information to families:

- Your family doctor (GP) or paediatrician
- School/School Counsellor
- National Disability Insurance Scheme, Phone – 1800 800 110, www.ndis.nsw.gov.au
- The Association for Children with a Disability (ACD NSW) Phone – (03) 9880 7000 or 1800 654 013. www.acd.org.au
- Carer's NSW - phone: 1800 242 636 www.carersnsw.asn.au
- Parent line – phone: 1300 130 052, weekdays 9am – 9pm, weekends 4pm – 9pm. phone service run by qualified counsellors for parents of children between 0-18 years. Provides advice or information about appropriate referral services
- Government website about raising children http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/intellectual_disability_d.html

Remember:

- Children with intellectual disability vary in their ability to learn and in their long term outcome. Other factors such as chronic illness, additional disabilities, the child's own personality and social support also play an important role in how much a child is able to learn.
- The earlier a child is diagnosed with intellectual disability and supports put in place the better the outcome for your child.
- It is important to find individual strengths and celebrate achievements.
- Many services are available to support people with disabilities and their families.