

# Intellectual Disability

Child Development Service



**Health**  
Northern Sydney  
Local Health District

# Introduction

Young children who are slow to develop skills are often described as having a developmental delay. These skills include walking, talking, self care (feeding, learning to use the toilet) and cognition (problem solving).

Children with a developmental delay learn skills at a slower rate than other children of the same age. Thus, a three year old child with a developmental delay may have the same skills as a two year old who does not have a developmental delay.

Developmental delay is often diagnosed by a Paediatrician or a Psychologist, or a team consisting of different professionals. Some children may have a developmental delay because of a particular medical condition or syndrome (such as Down syndrome). For many children there is no known medical cause.

One common cause of developmental delay is an underlying intellectual disability. Around three out of a hundred children have an intellectual disability.

## What is an intellectual disability?

Children with an intellectual disability have difficulties with thinking, learning and independence. They learn things more slowly than other children, and will often need more time and extra practice to develop skills that others learn easily (for example, counting, reading and writing). They may be unable to think as quickly as other children and may take extra time to answer questions. They may have difficulty learning and remembering new information. They may be able to follow directions, but may not do it as quickly as other children. They may have difficulty concentrating and working out how to solve complicated tasks.

## Tests for Intellectual Disability

Qualified psychologists have tests available which are widely accepted as being a good indicator of a child's intellectual ability. One of these tests is usually administered on the assessment day at the Child Development Service.

We also obtain information about the child's current skills from parents, therapists and teachers. The psychologist will observe the child and ask questions about adaptive functioning via interview or questionnaire. Adaptive functioning refers to how the child copes with the demands of everyday life and development of their independence skills.

# What does my child need?

A child with an intellectual disability has the same needs as any other child. All children benefit from a warm, secure and nurturing environment. They need to feel accepted and valued with their own set of strengths and weaknesses. This is important for the development of self-esteem which builds confidence for learning new skills.

A child with an intellectual disability also needs:

- Extra time to learn and practice new skills.
- To have tasks and instructions simplified and repeated.
- To hear language that is appropriate to their developmental level.
- To be praised for success.
- An individualised educational plan for preschool and school.
- Goals that can be realistically achieved.
- Opportunities to join in the activities of the family and the local community.

# Who can help my child?

A child with an intellectual disability needs to be taught many skills. Parents and professionals in early intervention programs work together to assist the child with this. Professionals may include speech pathologists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, special education teachers, social workers and psychologists.

## A. Education

Options are available to help support children with intellectual disabilities at school. Your child may be eligible for help with transition to school.

1. Some children attend mainstream schools with support (that is, with extra help from staff at the school).
2. Children with intellectual disabilities may attend support classes which are smaller, special classes within a mainstream school. These classes are not available at all schools. There are also support classes for children with autism, hearing impairment and physical disability.
3. Special schools are available for children with moderate to severe intellectual disability, autism, or complex educational and physical needs.

Schooling options can be discussed with your child's local school or the Learning and Wellbeing Officer with the Department of Education and Communities, the Catholic Education Office, the Independent Schools Association or Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect).

## B. Support Services and Therapy

Support services and therapy are available through Early Intervention providers operating under the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

# Adulthood

People with an intellectual disability are supported to have the same opportunities as others in the community – through schooling, work training, employment, social and sporting activities. They want to feel useful, and for others to accept and respect them. They want to be able to make their own choices, and to be able to express their feelings and opinions.

It is not possible to predict how a child with an intellectual disability will cope in adulthood, although those with a mild disability tend to develop a greater degree of independence.

Many adults with an intellectual disability can live successfully in the community. They may learn to manage the routine activities of everyday living, and maintain regular employment, but may need help with more complicated tasks, such as financial management, accessing Centrelink benefits, using public transport, and looking after their physical health.

A person with a more severe intellectual disability may have greater difficulty managing these ordinary activities of everyday living, and may need to live in an environment where there are others to assist and guide him/her on a daily basis. However, all are capable of some level of learning and can always find enjoyment in their lives.

## Effects on the Family

Finding out that your child has an intellectual disability can be distressing. It may be difficult explaining a child's disability to family members or friends. You may experience grief, disbelief, self-blame and feelings of isolation. These emotions are often very intense at the time of diagnosis and may recur over time. They are very normal reactions. Talking to other parents in a similar situation, joining a support group (for parents or siblings), or consulting experienced professionals may help.

Families need information, support, assistance and a break from time to time. Remember that even though your child has an intellectual disability, he/she will continue to learn new skills.

Specific recommendations and contact details regarding intervention services for your child are on your child's CDS Assessment Day Summary. If you want to speak to someone, phone your contact person at the Child Development Service.

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