

Intellectual Disability

Information for Parents and Teachers

What is an Intellectual Disability?

According to the law in Victoria, the term “Intellectual Disability” refers to two things:

- *People with an intellectual disability display significantly below average intelligence (based on an IQ test)*
- *People with an intellectual disability display significant difficulties with everyday living skills (identified before they are 18 years old).*

Some people may be described as having a “mild” intellectual disability and others may be described as having a “moderate”, “severe” or “profound” disability depending on how severely they are affected.

What does this mean for my child?

We must keep in mind that every person with an intellectual disability is unique and will have a different pattern of strengths and weaknesses. A child with an intellectual disability may have difficulties in areas such as:

- *Communication*
- *Use of community resources*
- *Academic ability*
- *Personal safety*
- *Social skills*
- *Self-care*
- *Independent living*
- *Health care*

Because IQ is a trait that remains fairly stable over the life span, children with an intellectual disability are likely to have difficulties in these areas throughout their lives. However, students with an intellectual disability CAN learn, but they are likely to learn and develop more slowly than their peers. With extra support, their development and learning potential can be maximised. It is also of vital importance to provide encouragement and praise where appropriate, as well as promoting their individual strengths and talents in other skill areas.

What is the difference between “Developmental Delay” and “Intellectual Disability”?

Parents of very young children often find that doctors or health professionals describe their child as having a “developmental delay”. This is a term that is used for children 0-6 years of age because they are considered too young to receive a diagnosis of intellectual disability. The reason for this is that children aged 0-6 years are frequently unable to sit and concentrate on a formal IQ assessment. And, as mentioned earlier, a diagnosis of “intellectual disability” cannot be given unless an IQ test is administered which indicates that the child displays significantly below average intelligence.

So, until a formal IQ test can be administered, professionals may use the term “developmental delay” to indicate that the child is experiencing difficulties in various areas of their skill development.

Simply because a young child is labelled as having a “developmental delay” does not always mean that they will subsequently be diagnosed with “intellectual disability” once they undergo formal IQ assessment.

What do people mean by co-existing disorders?

Children who have been diagnosed with an intellectual disability may receive a diagnosis of another, co-existing condition. For example, a child with an intellectual disability may also be diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Autism Spectrum Disorder and Intellectual Disability are two different disorders, however Intellectual Disability can often be a feature of Autism Spectrum Disorder. In other words, sometimes, children with Autism also have an intellectual disability.

The same applies to genetic disorders such as Down Syndrome. Although Down Syndrome is the primary diagnosis, a feature of Down Syndrome is that most children also have an intellectual disability.

Other conditions, such as Attention Deficit (*Hyperactivity*) Disorder and Oppositional Defiant Disorder may also be diagnosed alongside intellectual disability, but not always. It is important for Psychologists to try and determine which is the primary diagnosis and which are co-existing diagnoses.

Is a diagnosis of “Severe Language Disorder” also separate from a diagnosis of “Intellectual Disability”?

This is a similar case to that of Autism Spectrum Disorder or Down Syndrome.

When Psychologists administer intelligence (*IQ*) tests to determine whether children have an intellectual disability, they measure the children’s verbal/language and non-verbal skills. Thus, we obtain information about the child’s overall level of intelligence.

When children are given a diagnosis of “Severe Language Disorder”, it means that they have been assessed by a Speech Pathologist, who has assessed their language skills only. The Speech Pathologist has assessed that the child’s language skills are significantly below average.

So once again, the child’s low verbal ability or “Severe Language Disorder” is often a feature of intellectual disability.

How much importance should I place on my child’s IQ score?

In order for a child to receive extra support from government organisations, such as the Department of Education in Victoria, they need to meet certain criteria for funding. One of these criteria is that the student’s overall score on an IQ test falls below 70.

If a child’s score falls above a score of 70, a diagnosis of “intellectual disability” is not given.

For our everyday planning, however, the IQ score is not particularly meaningful. Rather than looking at a child’s IQ score, teachers, parents and other professionals will need to closely examine the child’s skills in various areas, academic as well as social, physical and emotional. They will then need to create an individual program with goals targeting the child’s areas of difficulty. At the same time, goals should be achievable so as to provide the child with a sense of success, with goals gradually increasing in difficulty as the child progresses.

My child has been diagnosed with an intellectual disability. What type of school should I send him/her to?

The choice is up to you! Although, this can be a difficult decision for parents to make.

There are several educational options for students with a diagnosis of an intellectual disability.

These include:

- Mainstream government schools
- Specialist Schools
- Special Developmental Schools
- Independent Schools
- Catholic Schools
- English Language Schools

If a child has been diagnosed with an Intellectual Disability, and has been successful in obtaining formal government assistance (eg. through the Program for Students with Disabilities under the category of Intellectual Disability), the child will be eligible to attend a mainstream government school. The child may also be eligible to attend a Specialist School or Special Developmental School, depending on several criteria including their IQ score.

The Department of Education (Victoria), on their website, list several questions that parents should ask themselves when deciding upon a school for their child.

These include:

- What individual needs and requirements does my child possess?

- What facilities does the school offer?
- Is the school in a convenient location for my family?
- What kind of “feel” do I have about the staff and the environment?
- What type of curriculum/academic subjects are on offer?
- What other services, such as after-school care programs, does the school offer?

Once a child has been diagnosed with an Intellectual Disability, there are a multitude of programs and services available to assist. The Program for Students with Disabilities provides formal support for children attending government schools in Victoria. Once a child is deemed eligible for assistance through this program, schools arrange regular meetings involving the child’s parents, teachers, student wellbeing staff and any other relevant professionals to establish an “Individual Learning Plan” with individual goals for that child. Other assistance is also available, such as the Language Support Program, counselling or interventions from School Psychologists, Speech Pathologists, Special Education Teachers and external services such as the Department of Human Services. See below for more information.

Even for children who are not eligible for formal government assistance, there are various educational programs and community services available to assist. Schools have a responsibility to cater for your child’s learning needs regardless of their disability. Do not hesitate to look for available supports, so as to maximise your child’s learning potential and development and enable them to gain a feeling of achievement and success.

Where can I get further information and support?

The Association for Children with a Disability have a great deal of information on services to assist. They also produce a comprehensive document entitled “**Through the Maze – A Guide to Benefits and Services for Families of Children with a Disability**” which has information and contact details for numerous community services. Visit www.acd.org.au or phone **9500 1232** or **1800 654 013**

The Department of Human Services in your local area can provide information on Early Childhood Intervention services for children aged 0-5 as well as other services for children aged 6 and over. Visit www.dhs.vic.gov.au/disability or phone **1800 783 783**.

Parents of children with a disability may be eligible for various government benefits, such as **Carer Allowance** or **Carer Payment**. Visit www.centrelink.gov.au, phone the **Disability, Sickness and Carers** line on **13 2717** or visit your local Centrelink office.

School-aged children can also receive assistance from the **Department of Education and Training (DET)**.

Visit www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/disabil. For information about Catholic schools, you can contact the **Catholic Education Office** on **9267 0228** or visit www.ceo.melb.catholic.edu.au. For information about independent schools, you can contact the **Association for Independent Schools** on **9825 7200** or visit www.ais.vic.edu.au

There are also many parent support organisations and state-wide service providers available that may be specific to your child’s needs. Visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au or www.infoxchange.net.au for more information and services. Your local council may also be a good starting point, or look under ‘Disability Services and Support Organisations’ in the Yellow Pages.

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