



American Association
on Intellectual and
Developmental Disabilities

Professionals working to support individuals with
intellectual and developmental disabilities

FAQ on Intellectual Disability

WHAT IS INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY?

Intellectual disability is a disability characterized by significant limitations both in **intellectual functioning** (reasoning, learning, problem solving) and in **adaptive behavior**, which covers a range of everyday social and practical skills. This disability originates before the age of 18.

IS INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY THE SAME AS DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITY?

Not exactly. Developmental disability is an umbrella term that includes intellectual disability but also includes physical disabilities. Some developmental disabilities can be strictly physical, such as blindness from birth. Some individuals have both physical and intellectual disabilities stemming from genetic or other physical causes (e.g., Down Syndrome, fetal alcohol syndrome). Sometimes intellectual disabilities can stem from nonphysical causes, such as the level of child stimulation and adult responsiveness.

IS INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY JUST DETERMINED BY AN IQ TEST?

No, but the IQ test is a major tool in measuring intellectual functioning, that is, mental capacity for learning, reasoning, problem solving, and so on. A test score of around 70—or as high as 75—indicates a limitation in intellectual functioning.

Other tests determine limitations in adaptive behavior, which covers three types of skills:

- Conceptual skills—language and literacy; money, time, and number concepts; and self-direction
- Social skills—interpersonal skills, social responsibility, self-esteem, gullibility, naïveté (i.e., wariness), social problem solving, and the ability to follow rules, obey laws, and avoid being victimized
- Practical skills—activities of daily living (personal care), occupational skills, healthcare, travel/transportation, schedules/routines, safety, use of money, use of the telephone

But evaluation and classification of individuals with intellectual disabilities is a much more complex issue. The major function of the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) is to publish the most advanced thinking in its manual, *Mental Retardation: Definition, Classification and Systems of Supports*. The most recent edition was published in 2002; the next is due in 2010.

In defining and assessing intellectual disability, AAIDD stresses that professionals must consider such factors as

- community environment typical of the individual's peers and culture
- linguistic diversity
- cultural differences in the way people communicate, move, and behavior

WHAT CAUSES INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY?

Some disabling conditions classified as developmental disabilities—such as autism or cerebral palsy—might include intellectual disabilities. Other developmental disabilities, such as Down Syndrome, fetal alcohol syndrome, and fragile X syndrome, could well include intellectual disabilities. Intellectual disabilities could also be caused by social factors, such as the level of child stimulation and adult responsiveness, and educational factors, such as the availability of family and educational supports that can promote mental development and greater adaptive skills.

Nevertheless, according to the AAIDD manual, *Mental Retardation: Definition, Classification and Systems of Supports*, approximately 40 to 50 percent of the causes of intellectual disabilities currently have no identifiable origin.

WHAT'S THE MOST MODERN THINKING ABOUT HOW TO HELP PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES?

AAIDD stresses that the overarching reason for evaluating and classifying individuals with intellectual disabilities is to tailor supports for each