

What Is Intellectual Disability?

Intellectual disability (ID) is a condition that affects how a child learns, solves problems, and understands information. It can also make daily tasks such as talking, getting dressed, or interacting with others more challenging. ID can show up early in life. Intellectual disabilities are caused when something affects how the brain develops. In many cases, the cause of ID is not known.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

How common is intellectual disability?

Intellectual disability is one of the most common developmental disabilities. It affects up to 3% of children.

For Parents and Caregivers: What should I do if I suspect my child has an intellectual disability?

Talk to a medical provider. They can refer you to specialists such as a developmental pediatrician, child psychologist, or geneticist for testing. Waitlists can be long and it's often easier for younger children to get an appointment, so schedule as soon as you can.

What kind of help is there for intellectual disability?

Common supports include:

- **Educational supports and therapies:** Speech, physical, and occupational therapies are available through Early Intervention (for children under three) or your local school district (children age three and older).
- **Behavioral supports:** These help children learn everyday skills and positive behaviors.
- **Home and community-based services:** New York State's Office for People with Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD) offers children and youth with intellectual disabilities services that support them throughout their entire lives.
- **Assistive technology:** Tools like communication devices and visual supports can help with learning, communicating, and daily activities.

What other conditions are common in people with intellectual disability?

Some children with ID also have autism, genetic conditions, language delays, or behavioral challenges. Be open with the medical provider about all symptoms and concerns.

Talking with a Medical Provider

When talking with medical providers or specialists, you might want to:

- **Bring notes:** Write down or take videos of any concerns or observations, including things that others have noticed.
- **Discuss:** Talk about what developmental milestones you should expect for your child's age.
- **Ask:** Find out what specialists the provider recommends you see and how often you should be following up with doctors.
- **Be strong:** Not all providers understand intellectual disabilities. Don't be afraid to ask a lot of questions and get a second opinion if needed.

What You Can Do at Home

Getting help can take time, and there are often waitlists. In the meantime, it may help to:

- **Create routines:** Schedules and predictability can reduce stress and help your child feel safe and secure.
- **Be consistent:** Repeating things and doing them the same way helps support learning.
- **Use simple language:** Give short, clear instructions.
- **Be patient and celebrate progress:** Every child develops at their own pace. Don't feel like every moment needs to be a form of therapy and teaching. Playing and enjoying your time together is important for your child, and you!

Learning about intellectual disability and getting help is a journey. You're not alone.

Search NYS



<https://bit.ly/searchnys>

NYS Department of Health County Programs – CYSHCN



<https://on.ny.gov/43ho1ZK>

ACT for Youth: Intellectual Disability



<https://bit.ly/act-intel>

About This Series

This series of handouts on health conditions was written by clinicians in Weill Cornell Medicine's Pediatric Mental Health Integration Program, partners in the ACT for Youth CYSHCN Program Center of Excellence at Cornell University.

