

HEALTHY MINDS
A WEEKLY COLUMN ALL ABOUT MENTAL WELLNESS
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Intellectual Disabilities



Intellectual Disability is a disability whereby a person is severely limited intellectually, and in his/her ability to function to adapt to the world, fully understand concepts, or to fully socialize, and it must originate before the age of 18. It was formerly called mental retardation, but most professionals and educators prefer intellectual disability. They are one in the same.

The most important organization dealing with this disorder is the AAIDD (the American Association of Intellectual Disability Disorders) who set up guidelines for defining, classifying, and supporting afflicted individuals.

They evaluate the individual's particular limitations and strengths, intellectually and in their ability to adapt to the outside world. Cultural and language factors are considered, as well as their ability to communicate, use their senses, and coordinate their bodies; their behavior is also considered. Though many have limitations, they also have strengths. When a person is fully assessed, a plan of support is formulated and a plan of action is put into place in order to strengthen a person's ability to function in his environment.

A disability is a personal limitation that limits a person's ability to get on in society. Intelligence refers to a person's mental capacity: to think in abstract terms, learn from experience, and to comprehend in general, often measured by standardized IQ tests. The ability to put what we know into everyday life is called adaptive behavior, which encompasses a variety of skills: conceptual skills (using and understanding language, reading and writing, dealing with money, and making practical decisions); social skills (being responsible, having meaningful relationships, feeling a sense of self-esteem, following directions, rules, and laws, and avoids being victimized, like being gullible and naïve), and; practical skills (personal chores such as using the toilet, eating, dressing, and so on, keeping a safe environment, having an occupational skill, and other daily chores such as preparing food, taking medicines, and using the phone).

Supports are provided in the community for persons with intellectual disabilities by friends, family, health practitioners, and appropriate agencies. Programs are mandated in schools. Supports help individuals function better in terms of self-determination and self-esteem.

In terms of human development, supports help individuals learn better coordination and motor skills, use of language and logical reasoning, development of trust and self-reliance, learning basic skills such as reading signs and counting change, learning more complex educational skills, using the toilet, following proper hygiene rules, laundering clothes, bathing, housekeeping, and other daily chores, participating in leisure activities,

participating in activities outside the home such as using public transportation, shopping, visiting friends, appropriately interacting with the public, and visiting friends and family, to name a few.

Employment preparation is part of the support that can be delivered, teaching job skills, interacting with co-workers and supervisors, completing tasks and learning new ones, and finding assistance in case of crisis situations. Intellectually disabled individuals are also taught health and safety skills such as avoiding hazards, calling for help, taking medication in a timely manner, and maintaining good mental and physical health.

In the realm of personal behavior, support systems teach them how to make appropriate decisions, get mental health and substance abuse treatments, make wise choices in their daily public behavior, and control their anger. They are also guided in making appropriate romantic and sexual decisions, socializing within and outside of the families, participating in group leisure activities, and they learn to protect themselves from exploitation, financial and otherwise, and to seek legal help when necessary.

The causes of intellectual disability can occur before birth (prenatal), just before and after birth (perinatal) and after birth (postnatal). Let me outline these causes as follows.

A. PRENATAL CAUSES

1. Chromosomal Disorders – These include close to 1000 different syndromes, including the most common
 - a. Down's Syndrome, though not hereditary, does involve faulty development of the 21st chromosome, and is the most common form of intellectual disability.
 - b. Williams Syndrome is caused by damage (absence of material) on the 7th pair of chromosomes.
 - c. Fragile X Syndrome is the most common hereditary cause of intellectual disability, caused from a pinching of the X chromosome on the 23rd pair, and is half-again more common in males than in females because of the extra X chromosome present on that particular chromosome pair in females.
 - d. Prader Willi Syndrome, caused by a paternal inheritance of a lack of genetic material on the 15th pair.
 - e. Inborn Errors of Metabolism are inborn lack of ability to manufacture essential biochemical compounds and trace elements. A leading disorder in this category is phenylketonuria (PKU) [see Tips of the Week].

f. Developmental Disorders of Brain Formation can be associated with other genetic syndromes, or may be associated with infections and other conditions that interfere with proper brain development. Two examples are:

(1) Microcephalus in which the head is small and conical, and where the prognosis is bleak.

(2) Hydrocephalus (literally water-on-the-brain) caused by an accumulation of cerebrospinal fluid producing critical brain pressure; it can often be diagnosed and treated early by drainage techniques, but can lead to intellectual disability.

g. Environmental Influences

(1) Malnutrition

(2) Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders caused by excessive drinking while pregnant and leading to several syndromes including fetal alcohol syndrome.

(3) Ingestion of other toxic substances, including cocaine, methamphetamines, heroin, and tobacco.

(4) Radiation poisoning (from X-rays, depleted uranium exposure [very common in the military], and other sources such as nuclear power-plant emissions).

(5) Rubella or German Measles and other infections in the mother during pregnancy can cause intellectual disabilities or blindness.

B. PERINATAL CAUSES: Here problems during childbirth can cause brain injuries and consequential intellectual disabilities.

1. Anoxia: complete deprivation of oxygen during the delivery

2. LBW or Low Birth Weight can be used to predict intellectual disabilities, as well as medical and behavioral difficulties. It is often but not always synonymous with premature birth, and is more common among poverty-stricken mothers.

3. STDs such as syphilis and herpes simplex can result in intellectual disabilities.

C. POSTNATAL CAUSES: These occur after birth and may be classified as biological and psychosocial.

1. Biological Postnatal Causes

- a. TBI or Traumatic Brain Injury can be caused by blows to the head and violent shaking. [NOTE: I am a trained presenter on shaken baby syndrome, and provide free programs through my association and training with PCAKY (Prevent Child Abuse Kentucky) and can provide that service or refer someone in your local area to do the same, so please contact me if there is a need.]
 - b. Infections (such as meningitis and encephalitis).
 - c. Environmental poisons, especially lead, as in lead paints (recently imported on toys from China).
2. Psychosocial Postnatal Causes
- a. Abuse – physical, mental, or sexual
 - b. Neglect – lack of nurturing or proper diet
 - c. Understimulation - little intellectual stimulation

TIP OF THE WEEK: Health Warning - Search for “aspartame dangers” on your computer. Your librarian will be glad to help you. Aspartame is the most common artificial sweetener and is associated with PKU, mentioned above; it is also associated with other serious and fatal conditions. A little research may make you avoid the substance (aka NutraSweet, Spoonful, Equal-Measure, and Equal) like the plague that it is. Rearrange the letters ASPARTAME and you get APART SEAM, which is what can happen to your health if you keep on using it.