

**Introduction**

**Categories of Disability Under IDEA**

Every year, under the federal law known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), millions of children with disabilities receive special services designed to meet their unique needs. Early intervention services are provided through the state to infants and toddlers with disabilities under three years of age and their families. For school-aged children and youth (aged 3 through 21), special education and related services are provided through the school system. These services can be very important in helping children and youth with disabilities develop, learn, and succeed in school and other settings.

**Who is Eligible for Services?**

Under IDEA, states are responsible for meeting the special needs of eligible children with disabilities. To find out if a child is eligible for services, he or she must first receive a full and individual initial evaluation. This evaluation is free. Two purposes of the evaluation are:

• to see if the child has a disability, as defined by IDEA; and

• to learn in more detail what special education and related services he or she needs.

**Infants and Toddlers, Under 3 Years of Age**

Under IDEA, “infants and toddlers with disabilities“ are defined as individuals under three years of age who need early intervention services because they are experiencing developmental delays, as measured by appropriate diagnostic instruments and procedures, in one or more of the following areas:

* cognitive development;

• physical development;

• communication development;

• social or emotional development; and

• adaptive development; or have a diagnosed physical or mental condition that has a high probability of resulting in developmental delay

The term may also include, if a state chooses, children under three years of age who would be at risk of experiencing a substantial developmental delay if early intervention services were not provided.

**Children and Youth Aged 3 Through 21 through 21**

IDEA lists 13 different disability categories under which 3- through 21-year-olds may be eligible for services. The disability categories listed in IDEA are:

• autism;

• deaf-blindness;

• deafness;

• emotional disturbance;

• hearing impairment;

• intellectual disability;

• multiple disabilities;

• orthopedic impairment;

• other health impairment;

• specific learning disability;

• speech or language impairment;

• traumatic brain injury; or

• visual impairment (including blindness).

IDEA further defines each of these disability terms. We’ve provided those definitions on pages 3 and 4. Under IDEA, a child may not be identified as a “child with a disability” primarily because he or she speaks a language other than English and does not speak or understand English well. A child may also not be identified as having a disability just because he or she has not had enough appropriate instruction in math or reading.

**Children Aged 3 Through 9**

It is important to know that, under IDEA, states and local educational agencies (LEAs) can use the term “developmental delay” with children aged 3 through 9:

if they experience developmental delays in one or more of the following areas:

• physical development;

• cognitive development;

• communication development;

• social or emotional development; or

• adaptive development; and who, because of the developmental delays, need special education and related services.

If a state chooses to include developmental delay in its definition of an eligible “child with a disability,” it must define precisely what the term means and ensure that its definition is consistent with IDEA’s definition. “Developmental delays” must be measured by appropriate diagnostic instruments and procedures. The state also determines whether the term applies to children aged 3 through 9, or to a subset of that age range (for example, ages 3 through 5).

Three more points to note about the term developmental delay: • A state may not require an LEA to adopt and use the term developmental delay.

• If an LEA uses the term, the LEA must conform to both the state’s definition of the term and to the age range the state has adopted.

• If a state does not adopt the term, an LEA may not independently use the term to establish a child’s eligibility under IDEA.

**Defining the 13 Disability Categories**

IDEA provides definitions of the 13 disability categories listed above. Federal definitions guide how states define who is eligible for a free appropriate public education under IDEA. The definitions are as follows:

**1. Autism**

…means a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before age three, that adversely affects a child’s educational performance. Other characteristics often associated with autism are engaging in repetitive activities and stereotyped movements, resistance to environmental change or change in daily routines, and unusual responses to sensory experiences. The term autism does not apply if the child’s educational performance is adversely affected primarily because the child has an emotional disturbance, as defined in #4 below. A child who shows the characteristics of autism after age 3 could be diagnosed as having autism if the criteria above are satisfied.

**2. Deaf-Blindness**

…means concomitant [simultaneous] hearing and visual impairments, the combination of which causes such severe communication and other developmental and educational needs that they cannot be accommodated in special education programs solely for children with deafness or children with blindness.

**3. Deafness**

…means a hearing impairment so severe that a child is impaired in processing linguistic information through hearing, with or without amplification, that adversely affects a child's educational performance.

**4. Emotional Disturbance**

…means a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child’s educational performance:

(a) An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.

(b) An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.

(c) Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.

(d) A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.

(e) A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.

The term includes schizophrenia. The term does not apply to children who are socially maladjusted, unless it is determined that they have an emotional disturbance.

**5. Hearing Impairment**

…means an impairment in hearing, whether permanent or fluctuating, that adversely affects a child’s educational performance but is not included under the definition of “deafness.”

**6. Intellectual Disability**

…means significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently [at the same time] with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period, that adversely affects a child’s educational performance.

**7. Multiple Disabilities**

…means concomitant [simultaneous] impairments (such as intellectual disability-blindness, intellectual disability-orthopedic impairment), the combination of which causes such severe educational needs that they cannot be accommodated in special education programs solely for one of the impairments. The term does not include deaf-blindness.

**8. Orthopedic Impairment**

…means a severe orthopedic impairment that adversely affects a child’s educational performance. The term includes impairments caused by a congenital anomaly, impairments caused by disease (e.g., poliomyelitis, bone tuberculosis), and impairments from other causes (e.g., cerebral palsy, amputations, and fractures or burns that cause contractures).

**9. Other Health Impairment**

…means having limited strength, vitality, or alertness, including a heightened alertness to environmental stimuli, that results in limited alertness with respect to the educational environment, that—

(a) is due to chronic or acute health problems such as asthma, attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, diabetes, epilepsy, a heart condition, hemophilia, lead poisoning, leukemia, nephritis, rheumatic fever, sickle cell anemia, and Tourette syndrome; and

(b) adversely affects a child’s educational performance

**10. Specific Learning Disability**

…means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The term does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities; of intellectual disability; of emotional disturbance; or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.

**11. Speech or Language Impairment**

...means a communication disorder such as stuttering, impaired articulation, a language impairment, or a voice impairment that adversely affects a child’s educational performance.

**12. Traumatic Brain Injury**

...means an acquired injury to the brain caused by an external physical force, resulting in total or partial functional disability or psychosocial impairment, or both, that adversely affects a child's educational performance. The term applies to open or closed head injuries resulting in impairments in one or more areas, such as cognition; language; memory; attention; reasoning; abstract thinking; judgment; problem-solving; sensory, perceptual, and motor abilities; psychosocial behavior; physical functions; information processing; and speech. The term does not apply to brain injuries that are congenital or degenerative, or to brain injuries induced by birth trauma.

**13. Visual Impairment Including Blindness**

...means an impairment in vision that, even with correction, adversely affects a child’s educational performance. The term includes both partial sight and blindness.

The information found in this handout was obtained from the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities and the Georgia Department of Education.

<https://www.parentcenterhub.org/wp-content/uploads/repo_items/gr3.pdf>

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