

Understanding Disabilities: An Introductory Guide

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Disabilities are rather common, affecting more than a quarter of adults — that's 61 million — in the United States.¹ Amongst children (3-17 years), nearly 7 percent have been diagnosed with a disability.² But what is a disability? What are common types and symptoms? Where can professionals find supportive resources? Many professionals, educators and caretakers of children often feel unequipped with how to help individuals affected by disabilities. This guide is intended to explore common questions related to disabilities to improve working knowledge, sensitivity and confidence in supporting persons with disabilities.

What are disabilities?

Disabilities are a group of conditions due to impairments that affect an individual's ability to develop, learn, communicate or participate in activities. There are several different kinds of disabilities that impact a person physically, mentally, socially, intellectually or a combination. All disabilities involve three dimensions.³

1. **Impairment** — A problem with the function or physical structure of the body or mind.
2. **Activity limitation** — Difficulty in performing physical or mental tasks.
3. **Participation restriction** — Lacking the ability to regularly engage in normal daily activities.

For example, a person may have partial hearing-loss (impairment) that would affect one's ability to hear and respond to different sounds (activity limitation), leading to comprehension difficulties when answering phone calls, hearing a clerk or teller at a store, and other day-to-day activities involving listening (participation restriction).

What is the current understanding surrounding the causes of disabilities?

Although disabilities have historically been understood simply as a health condition, recent understanding is that disabilities involve an interaction between a person's health and their environment. Sometimes there are characteristics of the environment that either support or worsen the disability. For example, a person with vision problems will have a tougher time reading signs if the lighting in the building is too dim, or a person in a wheelchair may not be able to reach food on the top shelf while grocery shopping. In both examples, characteristics of their environment limits their ability to complete a task. In understanding disabilities, it is important to think about what it is about the environment that may not meet individual needs. There are other environmental challenges that affect disabilities and include:

- Quality of health care services, such as living in an area not staffed with qualified health professionals.
- Accessibility, such as no access to reliable transportation to doctor's appointments or pharmacies.
- Affordability, such as not having health insurance coverage or being able to afford treatment.
- Physical constraints, such as being unable to navigate building entryways or read signage.
- Policies, such as a lack of supportive policies in place to fund disability services.
- Education, such as no disability education trainings to equip personnel with competent care.

What are common disabilities in children?⁴⁻¹²

There are several different types of disabilities, some which are more prevalent among children today.

The most common developmental disorders are:

- Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
9-10 percent of children
- Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
1.7 percent of children
- Physical Disabilities, such as epilepsy, *0.6 percent of children*;
hearing impairments, *0.1 percent of children*;
or cerebral palsy, *1 out of 323 children*
- Learning Disabilities, like dyslexia
8-10 percent of children
- Intellectual Disabilities, like Down syndrome or other genetic conditions
1.1 percent of children
- Sensory Processing Disorders (SPD)
5-16 percent of children

Where can I find more information?

If you are interested in learning more, find additional fact sheets as part of our **Understanding Disabilities** series.

[W 947-B Understanding Disabilities: Behavioral Health FAQ Sheet](#)

[W 947-C Understanding Disabilities: Intellectual and Learning Disabilities](#)

[W 947-D Understanding Disabilities: Screening for Disabilities in Children](#)

[W 947-E Understanding Disabilities: Respectful Etiquette and Language Guidelines](#)

[W 947-F Understanding Disabilities: Responsive Care](#)

[W 947-G Understanding Disabilities: Anxiety in Children and Youth](#)

[W 947-H Understanding Disabilities: Sensory Processing Disorder](#)

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