

Understanding Disabilities: Responsive Care

Kathryn Conrad, PhD, Extension Specialist, Department of Family and Consumer Sciences

Lori Gallimore, EdD, Extension Specialist, 4-H Youth Development

Think about all the things that parents, caretaker, and educators have to teach children: how to talk, how to be a good friend, or how to make smart choices. Many of these tasks may seem natural and learned along the way without much thought. Some caretakers, however, feel uncertain where to begin if they witness signs that their child is not developing in the way they might expect. But when should you be concerned about the child's development? Who do you turn to? If it is a developmental disability, what does treatment look like?

Since there are several different types of disabilities that vary from mild to severe, there is not a one-size-fits-all way to respond. The best place to start is to educate yourself about what the path to treatment might look like. Just know that there are a lot of supportive resources available and you are not alone.

How to Respond when Concerned about a Child's Development

Take Part in Developmental Screenings, Early and Often. Attending appointments with a pediatrician is the first place to start in ensuring children are on track in their development. These appointments screen for potential developmental delays and monitor these delays over time. Often if a developmental delay is present, a doctor will tell you to be patient and wait it out as it will likely resolve itself. If there is concern that a disability is present, your pediatrician will point you to the appropriate specialist or other resources for help. You may also want to complete [online developmental screening checklists](#) to track your child's progress. If you find yourself concerned at any point, bring this information to your doctor to seek help. The earlier the better!

Look Into Early Intervention. Because children's brains are most easily adaptable while they are very young, early intervention is key. Early intervention, in this case, means evaluating the problem with a specialist and coming up with an appropriate treatment plan as early in development as possible. By intervening early, children learn new skills and abilities that help to manage the delay or disability and often will improve their developmental path. However, all is not lost if intervention comes later as your child's brain continues developing well into young adulthood. Regardless of their age, finding supportive resources can make a world of difference.

- Visit the [Tennessee Disability Pathfinder](#) online or call 1-800-640-4636 to find a practitioner in your area who specializes in a specific developmental delay, disability or other behavioral health issue.
- Find local services by connecting with your state's [parent resource center](#).
- Learn more about the [special education services](#) that your school system provides by visiting your state's Department of Education website or speaking to school administration or counselor.
- Access disability benefits information at the [Tennessee Disability Determination Services](#) or call 1-800-342-1117 to assist your child with disabilities.
- Use your behavioral health benefits provided by your employer to find a local practitioner. These benefits may include a pediatric specialist, psychologist, applied behavior analysis (ABA) therapist, occupational therapist or other medical professional specializing in developmental delays. If you do not have coverage, seek out a local behavioral health nonprofit that specializes in developmental disabilities, such as [The Arc Tennessee](#), to find referrals to sliding scale services.

Seek Integrated Treatment. Quite often, developmental disorders co-occur with other health conditions. Commonly, an “integrated approach” using several different treatments is effective. Expect that many different treatments may be tried until the best treatment plan that fits for your child and family is found. Treatments may include a combination of the following:

- Individual therapies with an occupational, physical, or speech therapist or educational psychologist.
- A combination of specialized therapeutic approaches, such as applied behavior analysis (ABA); speech or vision therapy; and/or music, art or equine therapy.
- Individual counseling or family therapy.
- Medication.
- Special Education with an individualized education plan (IEP) or 504 plan.

Be an Advocate. It is essential in this process of finding a treatment plan that works that you be patient. Be an advocate not simply for your child, but also for yourself and your family to get needed support. Here are some suggestions:

- Join online social networking groups to gain support and access additional resources.
- Learn of events commemorating certain disabilities, such as Autism Awareness (April) or Dyslexia Awareness (October).
- Build community with others by seeking out local or state events.
- Find free resources through several online organizations that serve people of different disability types, such as:
 - American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD) — aapd.com
 - American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) — aaid.org
 - Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDA) — ldaamerica.org
 - National Alliance of Mental Illness (NAMI) — nami.org
 - Disability Rights Legal Center (DRLC) — thedrlc.org
 - Job Accommodation Network (JAN) — askjan.org

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-A Understanding Disabilities: An Introductory Guide](#)

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

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

Conclusion

Science is constantly advancing in the understanding and treatment of different disabilities. It may seem overwhelming at first as a parent, educator or family member of a child with a disability, and many may not know where to begin. Build a network of supportive friends, family and professionals who can connect you to the right resources. Most importantly, give yourself a bit of grace and patience as you navigate this transition.

References

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) Why act early if you're concerned about development? Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/whyActEarly.html>
2. Child Mind Institute. (2017) Parents guide to developmental milestones. Retrieved from <https://childmind.org/guide/developmental-milestones/>
3. Lipkin et al. (2020). Promoting optimal development: Identifying infants and young children with developmental disorders through developmental surveillance and screening. *Pediatrics*, 145, 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2019-3449>



UTIA.TENNESSEE.EDU

Real. Life. Solutions.™