

# INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY



**World Health  
Organization**

REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE **Eastern Mediterranean**

## What is intellectual disability?

Intellectual disability is when a child has major difficulty or delay in acquiring skills across most developmental areas including:

- motor (movement) skills
- communication and speech
- social interaction
- play and learning (cognitive skills).

Lower intelligence limits the ability of an affected child to learn and function at the expected level.

Intelligence quotient (IQ) tests can provide a guide to someone's abilities but should only be used if the tests have been adapted for use in your language by professionals.

There are different degrees of intellectual disability, ranging from mild to profound.

## Common signs and symptoms of intellectual disability

The more severe the intellectual disability, the earlier the affected child will show symptoms. The main feature is delay in learning and doing things that children are expected to do when they reach a certain age. For example, the affected child may:

- sit up, crawl, or walk later than other children
- learn to talk later, or have trouble speaking
- find it hard to remember things
- have trouble in communicating their wants and understanding social rules
- have trouble seeing the results of their actions
- have trouble solving problems
- have trouble doing everyday tasks such as dressing up, eating without help, learning at school, handling money and working independently.

## What causes intellectual disability?

There are many different causes of intellectual disability, and sometimes no specific cause can be found, but common causes include:

- factors affecting the child before birth: a genetic syndrome such as Down syndrome or Fragile X syndrome, brain malformation, maternal disease and environmental influences (such as excessive alcohol use by the pregnant mother) or infection during pregnancy;
- factors during birth and delivery, for example a difficult labour causing less oxygen to reach the baby; and
- factors affecting the child after birth: infections like meningitis, whooping cough, or measles, severe head injury, near-drowning, extreme malnutrition, exposure to toxic substances such as lead, and severe neglect or abuse.

## When should you seek help for your child?

If you think there might be a problem with your child's development, contact your doctor or see a pediatrician as soon as possible. The sooner you get help, the greater the chance that your child can reach his or her full intellectual and functional capacity.

## Treating intellectual disability

There is no cure for intellectual disability. However, depending on the severity of the disability and the areas of function impaired, different techniques are available to help your child function better. Your doctor will refer you to available institutes and rehabilitation centers offering these services.

The most common services that can help your child to function better and adapt to everyday life include:

- physical therapy to help increase mobility and find adaptive solutions to mobility problems
- speech therapy to improve communication by enhancing reception and expression skills
- occupational therapy to improve self-care, leisure (knitting, playing games) and domestic activities such as cooking and cleaning, and employment skills.

## How can you help your child with intellectual disability?

There are many things you can do to help your child live a more independent and fulfilling life. Accept the situation, learn more about it and improve it with following professional advice:

- Schedule the day with regular times for eating, playing, learning and sleeping.
- Break up everyday tasks into smaller components. Try to teach one component at a time with multiple repetitions.
- Encourage your child to be independent; involve them in everyday life as much as safely possible.
- Learn what is stressful for your child and what makes them happy. What are the child's strengths and weaknesses, and how best do they learn?

- Be aware that people with intellectual disability may get agitated or irritable when facing new situations.
- Keep them in mainstream schools as far as possible, even if it is part time.
- Be careful about their general hygiene, and train them to take care of themselves.
- Protect them from abuse.
- Respect their right to have a safety zone within a visible boundary where they can feel safe and comfortable, and move around and play freely the way they like.
- Communicate and share information with teachers and other parents who have children with similar conditions.

## How can teachers help a child with intellectual disability?

Plan how to address the child's special educational needs. Share the plan with their parents and keep in regular contact with them. Keep the parents informed about their child's progress at school and any difficulties they face, to find better solutions and improve the situation.

There are simple things you can do to help a child with intellectual disability in the classroom:

- Ask the child to sit at the front of the class.
- Give them extra time to understand assignments.
- Break long assignments into smaller pieces.
- Be vigilant about bullying and take appropriate action to stop it.

*This is one of a series of factsheets produced by the World Health Organization (WHO) to give the general public more information about mental disorders and how they can be treated. You can download all the factsheets free of charge from the WHO website at: [www.emro.who.int/mnh](http://www.emro.who.int/mnh).*



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