

Developmental, Cognitive, and Intellectual Disabilities

Overview

Developmental disability refers to a group of disabilities that begin in childhood and continue through adulthood. Some of the disabilities have physical manifestations, some have cognitive or intellectual manifestations, and some have both. For example, people with cerebral palsy, spina bifida, and hydrocephalus are all considered to have a developmental disability, but they may or may not have a cognitive disability. In general, people with an intellectual disability, such as Down syndrome, fragile X syndrome, or Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, learn more slowly than their peers. This can affect communicative ability, reasoning, and social skills. People with intellectual and cognitive disabilities may require more time to perform tasks and process information. In the past, developmental disorders included pervasive developmental disorders, but this has been redefined as Autism Spectrum Disorders, so you may want to refer to specific information for patrons that may have difficulty with communication and socialization. Many people with developmental disabilities do not have any distinguishable physical characteristics. People with intellectual and cognitive disabilities may live independently. Patrons with developmental disabilities have many of the same recreational and information needs as do all patrons. People with these types of disabilities attend mainstream colleges, work in rewarding jobs, testify in court, marry, have children, and enjoy sports and reading, among other things.

Tips

- Develop programs that have universal appeal.
- Do not underestimate people with developmental disabilities.
- Use universal or easily recognizable graphic representation on signage.
- Maintain a barrier-free facility, with easily manipulated door handles and doors, restroom fixtures, and water fountains.
- Talk directly to the patron, rather than a caregiver.
- Listen and be patient.
- Give concrete directions.
- Demonstrate as well as tell.
- Provide appropriate materials immediately. Provide opportunities to try things rather than simply explaining a given task.
- Do not combine excessive instructions into a wordy command. Break instructions into steps, and relay steps individually.
- Provide positive reinforcement to employees, and answer questions quickly.
- Involve patrons in clubs or group activities that are age/interest appropriate.
- Provide quiet and/or private spaces for people to process information or compose themselves.

Recommended Materials

- Hi-lo books, including new adult reader material.
- Books written for children are generally not appropriate for teens and adults.
- Book and audio sets.
- Audio books.

Assistive Technology

- Software programs, such as vocabulary- and communication-building skills, for example, those designed by [Laureate Learning](#) and by the [Attainment Company](#).
- Touch screens that enable the user to respond by simply touching the screen.
- Screen readers.
- A variety of input devices such as Intellikeys, an alternative keyboard that is easy to see, touch, and understand, or the Jelly Bean switch, a large, durable, single switch that activates regardless of where the user presses and provides audible feedback.
- Voice input and output devices.
- Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC).

Recommended Resources

- [The Arc](#) is an information, advocacy, and service-provision organization with chapters in most states.
- [National Association of Council on Developmental Disabilities](#) focuses on public policy, this organization advocates for individuals with developmental disabilities.
- [National Down Syndrome Society](#) has basic information about Down syndrome.
- [The Council for Exceptional Children](#) is a professional association of educators dedicated to advancing the success of children with exceptionalities provides information regarding public policy, resources for educators, and more for students with special needs.