

Intellectual Disability

Once called mental retardation, is characterized by below-average intelligence or mental ability and a lack of skills necessary for day-to-day living. People with intellectual disabilities can and do learn new skills, but they learn them more slowly. There are varying degrees of intellectual disability, from mild to profound.

Someone with intellectual disability has limitations in two areas. These areas are:

- **Intellectual functioning.** Also known as IQ, this refers to a person's ability to learn, reason, make decisions, and solve problems.
- **Adaptive behaviors.** These are skills necessary for day-to-day life, such as being able to communicate effectively, interact with others, and take care of oneself.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Signs may appear during infancy, or they may not be noticeable until a child reaches school age. It often depends on the severity of the disability. Some of the most common signs of intellectual disability are:

- Rolling over, sitting up, crawling, or walking late
- Talking late or having trouble with talking
- Slow to master things like **potty training**, dressing, and feeding themselves
- Difficulty remembering things
- Inability to connect actions with consequences
- Behavior problems such as explosive tantrums
- Difficulty with problem-solving or logical thinking

In children with severe or profound intellectual disability, there may be other health problems as well. These problems may include **seizures**, mood disorders (anxiety, autism, etc.), motor skills impairment, vision problems, or hearing problems.

What causes intellectual disability?

Anytime something interferes with normal [brain](#) development, intellectual disability can result. However, a specific cause for intellectual disability can only be pinpointed about a third of the time.

The most common causes of intellectual disability are:

- **Genetic conditions.** These include things like Down syndrome and fragile X syndrome.
- **Problems during pregnancy.** Things that can interfere with fetal [brain](#) development include alcohol or drug use, malnutrition, certain infections, or [preeclampsia](#).
- **Problems during childbirth.** Intellectual disability may result if a baby is deprived of oxygen during childbirth or born extremely premature.
- **Illness or injury.** Infections like [meningitis](#), [whooping cough](#), or the [measles](#) can lead to intellectual disability. Severe [head injury](#), near-drowning, extreme malnutrition, infections in the brain, exposure to toxic substances such as lead, and severe neglect or abuse can also cause it.
- **None of the above.** In two-thirds of all children who have intellectual disability, the cause is unknown.



Steps to help your intellectually disabled child include:

- Learn everything you can about intellectual disabilities. The more you know, the better advocate you can be for your child.
- Encourage your child's independence. Let your child try new things and encourage your child to do things by themselves. Provide guidance when it's needed and give positive feedback when your child does something well or master's something new.

- Get your child involved in group activities. Taking an art class or participating in Scouts will help your child build social skills.
- Stay involved. By keeping in touch with your child's teachers, you'll be able to follow their progress and reinforce what your child is learning at school through practice at home.
- Get to know other parents of intellectually disabled children. They can be a great source of advice and emotional support.