

Learning, Intellectual, and Multiple Disabilities



Learning Disabilities

Sara's Story

When Sara was in the first grade, her teacher started teaching the students how to read. Sara's parents were really surprised when Sara had a lot of trouble. She was bright and eager, so they thought that reading would come easily to her. It didn't. She couldn't match the letters to their sounds or combine the letters to create words.

Sara's problems continued into second grade. She still wasn't reading, and she was having trouble with writing, too. The school asked Sara's mom for permission to evaluate Sara to find out what was causing her problems. Sara's mom gave permission for the evaluation.

The school conducted an evaluation and learned that Sara has a learning disability. She started getting special help in school right away.

Sara's still getting that special help. She works with a reading specialist and a resource room teacher every day. She's in the fourth grade now, and she's made real progress! She is working hard to bring her reading and writing up to grade level. With help from the

school, she'll keep learning and doing well.

What are Learning Disabilities?

Learning disability is a general term that describes specific kinds of learning problems. A learning disability can cause a person to have trouble learning and using certain skills. The skills most often affected are: reading, writing, listening, speaking, reasoning, and doing math.

"Learning disabilities" is not the only term used to describe these difficulties. Others include:

- *dyslexia*—which refers to difficulties in reading;
- *dysgraphia*—which refers to difficulties in writing; and
- *dyscalcula*—which refers to difficulties in math.

All of these are considered learning disabilities.

Learning disabilities (LD) vary from person to person. One person with LD may not have the same kind of learning problems as another person with LD. Sara, in our example above, has trouble with reading and writing. Another person with LD may have problems with understanding math. Still another person may have trouble in both of these areas, as well as with understanding what people are saying.

Researchers think that learning disabilities are caused by differences in how a person's brain works and how it processes information. Children with learning disabilities are not "dumb" or "lazy." In fact, they usually have average or above average intelligence. Their brains just process information differently.

There is no “cure” for learning disabilities. They are life-long. However, children with LD can be high achievers and can be taught ways to get around the learning disability. With the right help, children with LD can and do learn successfully.

How Common are Learning Disabilities?

Very common! As many as 1 out of every 5 people in the United States has a learning disability. Almost 1 million children (ages 6 through 21) have some form of a learning disability and receive special education in school. In fact, one-third of all children who receive special education have a learning disability (*Twenty-Ninth Annual Report to Congress, U.S. Department of Education, 2010*).

What Are the Signs of a Learning Disability?

While there is no one “sign” that a person has a learning disability, there are certain clues. We’ve listed a few below. Most relate to elementary school tasks, because learning disabilities tend to be identified in elementary school. This is because school focuses on the very things that may be difficult for the child—reading, writing, math, listening, speaking, reasoning. A child probably won’t show all of these signs, or even most of them. However, if a child shows a number of these problems, then parents and the teacher should consider the possibility that the child has a learning disability.

When a child has a learning disability, he or she:

- may have trouble learning the alphabet, rhyming words, or connecting letters to their sounds;
- may make many mistakes when reading aloud, and repeat and pause often;
- may not understand what he or she reads;
- may have real trouble with spelling;
- may have very messy handwriting or hold a pencil awkwardly;
- may struggle to express ideas in writing;
- may learn language late and have a limited vocabulary;
- may have trouble remembering the sounds that letters make or hearing slight differences between words;
- may have trouble understanding jokes, comic strips, and sarcasm;
- may have trouble following directions;
- may mispronounce words or use a wrong word that sounds similar;

- may have trouble organizing what he or she wants to say or not be able to think of the word he or she needs for writing or conversation;
- may not follow the social rules of conversation, such as taking turns, and may stand too close to the listener;
- may confuse math symbols and misread numbers;
- may not be able to retell a story in order (what happened first, second, third); or
- may not know where to begin a task or how to go on from there.

If a child has unexpected problems learning to read, write, listen, speak, or do math, then teachers and parents may want to investigate more. The same is true if the child is struggling to do any one of these skills. The child may need to be evaluated to see if he or she has a learning disability.

About the Evaluation Process

If you are concerned that your child may have a learning disability, contact his or her school and request that the school conduct an individualized evaluation under IDEA (the nation’s special education law) to see if, in fact, a learning disability is causing your child difficulties in school. Visit NICHCY’s website and read more about the evaluation process, beginning at: <http://nichcy.org/schoolage/evaluation/>

What if the School System Declines to Evaluate Your Child?

If the school doesn't think that your child's learning problems are caused by a learning disability, it may decline to evaluate your child. If this happens, there are specific actions you can take. These include:

- *Contact your state's Parent Training and Information Center (PTI) for assistance.* The PTI can offer you guidance and support in what to do next. Find your PTI by visiting: <http://www.parentcenternetwork.org/parentcenterlisting.html>
- *Consider having your child evaluated by an independent evaluator.* You may have to pay for this evaluation, or you can ask that the school pay for it. To learn more about independent evaluations, visit NICHCY at: <http://nichcy.org/schoolage/parental-rights/iee>
- *Ask for mediation, or use one of IDEA's other dispute resolution options.* Parents have the right to disagree with the school's decision not to evaluate their child and be heard. To find out more about dispute resolution options, visit NICHCY at: <http://nichcy.org/schoolage/disputes/overview>

IDEA's Definition of LD

Not surprisingly, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) includes a definition of "specific learning disability." We've presented this in the box below. IDEA also lists evaluation procedures that must be used at a minimum to identify and document that a child has a specific learning disability. These will now be discussed in brief.

Additional Evaluation Procedures for LD

Now for the confusing part! The ways in which children are identified as having a learning disability have changed over the years. Until recently, the most common approach was to use a "severe discrepancy" formula. This referred to the gap, or discrepancy, between the child's intelligence or aptitude and his or her actual performance.

However, in the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, how LD is determined has been expanded. IDEA now requires that states adopt criteria that:

- *must not require* the use of a severe discrepancy between intellectual ability and achievement in determining whether a child has a specific learning disability;



IDEA's Definition of "Specific Learning Disability"

The nation's special education law specifically defines the term "specific learning disability," as follows:

(10) *Specific learning disability* —(i) *General.* Specific learning disability means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia.

(ii) *Disorders not included.* Specific learning disability does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.

34 CFR §300.8(c)(10)

- **must permit** local educational agencies (LEAs) to use a process based on the child's response to scientific, research-based intervention; and
- **may permit** the use of other alternative research-based procedures for determining whether a child has a specific learning disability.

Basically, what this means is that, instead of using a severe discrepancy approach to determining LD, school systems may provide the student with a research-based intervention and keep close track of the student's performance. Analyzing the student's response to that intervention (RTI) may then be considered by school districts in the process of identifying that a child has a learning disability.

There are also other aspects required when evaluating children for LD. These include observing the student in his or her learning environment (including the regular education setting) to document academic performance and behavior in the areas of difficulty.

This entire fact sheet could be devoted to what IDEA requires when children are evaluated for a learning disability. Instead, let us refer you to a training module on the subject. It's quite detailed, but if you would like to know those details, read through Module 11 of NICHCY's *Building the Legacy* curriculum on IDEA 2004. It's available online, at: <http://nichcy.org/laws/idea/legacy/module11>

Moving on, let us suppose that the student *has* been diagnosed with a specific learning disability. What next?

What About School?

Once a child is evaluated and found eligible for special education and related services, school staff and parents meet and develop what is known as an **Individualized Education Program**, or IEP. This document is very important in the educational life of a child with learning disabilities. It describes the child's needs and the services that the public school system will provide free of charge to address those needs. Learn more about the IEP, what it includes, and how it is developed, at: <http://nichcy.org/schoolage/iep>

Supports or changes in the classroom (called *accommodations*) help most students with LD. Common accommodations are listed in the "Tips for Teachers" box on the next page. Accessible instructional materials (AIM) are among the most helpful to students whose LD affects their ability to read and process printed language. Thanks to IDEA 2004, there are numerous places to turn now for AIMs. We've listed one central source in "Resources Especially for Teachers" on the next page.

Assistive technology can also help many students work around their learning disabilities. Assistive technology can range from "low-tech" equipment such as tape recorders to "high-tech" tools such as reading machines (which read books aloud) and voice recogni-

tion systems (which allow the student to "write" by talking to the computer). To learn more about AT for students who have learning disabilities, visit LD Online's Technology section, at: <http://www.ldonline.org/indepth/technology>

What About Home?

A child with learning disabilities may need help at home as well as in school. Some suggestions are given in under "Tips for Parents" (see page 6) where you'll find other relevant items listed, too.

Conclusion

Learning disabilities clearly affect some of the key skills in life—reading, writing, doing math. Because many people have learning disabilities, there is a great deal of expertise and support available. Take advantage of the many organizations focused on LD. Their materials and their work are intended solely to help families, students, educators, and others understand LD and address it in ways that have long-lasting impact.

Tips for Teachers

Learn as much as you can about the different types of LD. The resources and organizations listed below can help you identify specific techniques and strategies to support the student educationally.

Seize the opportunity to make an enormous difference in this student's life! Find out and emphasize what the student's strengths and interests are. Give the student positive feedback and lots of opportunities for practice.

Provide instruction and accommodations to address the student's special needs. Examples:

- breaking tasks into smaller steps, and giving directions verbally and in writing;
- giving the student more time to finish schoolwork or take tests;
- letting the student with reading problems use instructional materials that are accessible to those with print disabilities;

- letting the student with listening difficulties borrow notes from a classmate or use a tape recorder; and
- letting the student with writing difficulties use a computer with specialized software that spell checks, grammar checks, or recognizes speech.

Learn about the different testing modifications that can really help a student with LD show what he or she has learned.

Teach organizational skills, study skills, and learning strategies. These help all students but are particularly helpful to those with LD.

Work with the student's parents to create an IEP tailored to meet the student's needs.

Establish a positive working relationship with the student's parents. Through regular communication, exchange information about the student's progress at school.

Resources Especially for Teachers

LD Online | For Educators

<http://www.ldonline.org/educators>

LD Online | Teaching and Instruction

<http://www.ldonline.org/indepth/teaching>

National Center for Learning Disabilities | Especially for Teachers

<http://www.nclد.org/at-school/especially-for-teachers>

TeachingLD | A service of the Division for Learning Disabilities (DLD) of the Council for Exceptional Children
<http://teachingld.org/>

Learning Disabilities Association of America | For Teachers

<http://www.ldanatl.org/aboutld/teachers/index.asp>

National Center for Accessible Instructional Materials | Find AIM in your state!

<http://aim.cast.org/>

Reading Rockets | For Teachers

<http://www.readingrockets.org/audience/teachers>



Tips for Parents

Learn about LD. The more you know, the more you can help yourself and your child.

Praise your child when he or she does well. Children with LD are often very good at a variety of things. Find out what your child really enjoys doing, such as dancing, playing soccer, or working with computers. Give your child plenty of opportunities to pursue his or her strengths and talents.

Find out the ways your child learns best. Does he or she learn by hands-on practice, looking, or listening? Help your child learn through his or her areas of strength.

Let your son or daughter help with household chores. These can build self-confidence and concrete skills. Keep instructions simple, break down tasks into smaller steps, and reward your child's efforts with praise.

Make homework a priority. Read more about how to help your child be a success at homework in the resources listed below.

Pay attention to your child's mental health (and your own!). Be open to counseling, which can help your child deal with frustration, feel better about himself or herself, and learn more about social skills.

Talk to other parents whose children have LD. Parents can share practical advice and emotional support. You can identify parent groups



in your area via NICHCY's State Resource Sheets. Go to the section entitled "Disability-Specific Agencies" and scroll down until you reach "learning disabilities."

Meet with school personnel and help develop an IEP to address your child's needs. Plan what accommodations your child needs, and don't forget to talk about AIM or assistive technology!

Establish a positive working relationship with your child's teacher. Through regular communication, exchange information about your child's progress at home and at school.

Resources Especially for Parents

LD Online | For Parents

<http://www.ldonline.org/parents>

LD Online | Parenting and Family

<http://www.ldonline.org/indepth/parenting>

National Center for Learning Disabilities | In the Home

<http://www.nclد.org/in-the-home>

Learning Disabilities Association of America | For Parents

<http://www.ldanatل.org/aboutld/parents/index.asp>

Reading Rockets | For Parents

<http://www.readingrockets.org/audience/parents>

Intellectual Disabilities

Matthew's Story

Matt is 15 years old. Because Matt has an intellectual disability, he has been receiving special education services since elementary school. These services have helped him tremendously, because they are designed to fit his special learning needs.

Last year he started high school. He, his family, and the school took a good hard look at what he wants to do when secondary school is over. Does he want more education? A job? Does he have the skills he needs to live on his own?

Answering these questions has helped Matt and the school plan for the future. He's always been interested in the outdoors, in plants, and especially in trees. He knows all the tree names and can recognize them by their leaves and bark. So this year he's learning about jobs like forestry, landscaping, and grounds maintenance. Next year he hopes to get a part-time job. He's learning to use public transportation, so he'll be able to get to and from the job.

Having an intellectual disability makes it harder for Matt to learn new things. He needs things to be very concrete. But he's determined. He wants to work outside, maybe in the park service or in a greenhouse, and he's getting ready!

What are an Intellectual Disability?

Intellectual disability is a term used when a person has certain limitations in mental functioning and in skills such as communicating, taking care of him or herself, and social skills. These limitations will cause a child to learn and develop more slowly than a typical child.

Children with intellectual disabilities (sometimes called *cognitive disabilities* or *mental retardation*) may take longer to learn to speak, walk, and take care of their personal needs such as dressing or eating. They are likely to have trouble learning in school. They *will* learn, but it will take them longer. There may be some things they cannot learn.

What Causes an Intellectual Disability?

Doctors have found many causes of intellectual disabilities. The most common are:

- *Genetic conditions.* Sometimes an intellectual disability is caused by abnormal genes inherited from parents, errors when genes combine, or other reasons. Examples of genetic conditions are Down syndrome, fragile X syndrome, and phenylketonuria (PKU).
- *Problems during pregnancy.* An intellectual disability can result when the baby does not

disabilities. However, most children with an intellectual disability can learn to do many things. It just takes them more time and effort than other children.

How Common are Intellectual Disabilities?

Intellectual disability is the most common developmental disability.¹ Approximately 6.5 million people in the United States have an intellectual disability.² More than 545,000 children (ages 6-21) have some level of intellectual disability and receive special education services in public school under this category in IDEA, the nation's special education law.³ In fact, 1 in every 10 children who need special education have some form of intellectual disability.⁴

develop inside the mother properly. For example, there may be a problem with the way the baby's cells divide as it grows. A woman who drinks alcohol or gets an infection like rubella during pregnancy may also have a baby with an intellectual disability.

- *Problems at birth.* If a baby has problems during labor and birth, such as not getting enough oxygen, he or she may have an intellectual disability.
- *Health problems.* Diseases like whooping cough, the measles, or meningitis can cause intellectual disabilities. They can also be caused by extreme malnutrition (not eating right), not getting enough medical care, or by being exposed to poisons like lead or mercury.

An intellectual disability is not a disease. You can't catch an intellectual disability from anyone. It's also not a type of mental illness, like depression. There is no cure for intellectual

- have trouble solving problems, and/or
- have trouble thinking logically.

How are Intellectual Disabilities Diagnosed?

Intellectual disabilities are diagnosed by looking at two main things. These are:

- the ability of a person's brain to learn, think, solve problems, and make sense of the world (called IQ or *intellectual functioning*); and
- whether the person has the skills he or she needs to live independently (called *adaptive behavior*, or adaptive functioning).

Intellectual functioning, or IQ, is usually measured by a test called an IQ test. The average score is 100. People scoring below 70 to 75 are thought to have an intellectual disability. To measure adaptive behavior, professionals look at what a child can do in comparison to other children of his or her age. Certain skills are important to adaptive behavior. These are:

- daily living skills, such as getting dressed, going to the bathroom, and feeding one's self;
- communication skills, such as understanding what is said and being able to answer;
- social skills with peers, family members, adults, and others.

To diagnose an intellectual disability, professionals look at the person's mental abilities (IQ) and his or her adaptive skills.

What are the Signs of Intellectual Disability?

There are many signs of an intellectual disability. For example, children with an intellectual disability may:

- sit up, crawl, or walk later than other children;
- learn to talk later, or have trouble speaking,
- find it hard to remember things,
- not understand how to pay for things,
- have trouble understanding social rules,
- have trouble seeing the consequences of their actions,

Both of these are highlighted in the definition of this disability in the box on this page. This definition comes from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA is the federal law that guides how early intervention and special education services are provided to infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities.

Providing services to help individuals with intellectual disabilities has led to a new understanding of how we define the term. After the initial diagnosis is made, we look at a person's strengths and weaknesses. We also look at how much support or help the person needs to get along at home, in school, and in the community. This approach gives a realistic picture of each individual. It also recognizes that the "picture" can change. As the person grows and learns, his or her ability to get along in the world grows as well.

Help for Babies and Toddlers

When a baby is born with an intellectual disability, his or her parents should know that there's a lot of help available—and immediately. Shortly after the diagnosis of ID is confirmed, parents will want to get in touch with the **early intervention** system in their community. We'll tell you how in a moment.

Early intervention is a system of services designed to help infants and toddlers with disabilities (until their 3rd birthday) and their families. It's mandated by IDEA. Staff work with the child's family to develop what is known as an *Individualized Family*

Definition of "Intellectual Disability" under IDEA

Until Rosa's Law was signed into law by President Obama in October 2010, IDEA used the term "mental retardation" instead of "intellectual disability." Rosa's Law changed the term to be used in future to "intellectual disability." The definition itself, however, did not change. Accordingly, "intellectual disability" is defined as...

"...significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period, that adversely affects a child's educational performance."

[34 CFR §300.8(c)(6)]

Services Plan, or *IFSP*. The IFSP will describe the child's unique needs as well as the services he or she will receive to address those needs. The IFSP will also emphasize the unique needs of the family, so that parents and other family members will know how to help their young child with intellectual disability. Early intervention services may be provided on a sliding-fee basis, meaning that the costs to the family will depend upon their income.

To access early intervention services in your area, consult NICHCY's *State Resource Sheet* for your state. It's available online at: <http://nichcy.org/state-organization-search-by-state>

There, you'll find a listing for early intervention under the first section, **State Agencies**. The agency listed will be able to put you in contact with the early intervention program in your community.

Help for School-Aged Children

Just as IDEA requires that early intervention be made available to babies and toddlers with disabilities, it requires that **special education and related services** be made available free of charge to every eligible child with a disability, including preschoolers (ages 3-21). These services are specially designed to address the child's individual needs associated with the disability—in this case, an intellectual disability.

School staff will work with the child's parents to develop an *Individualized Education Program*, or *IEP*. The IEP is similar to an IFSP. It describes the child's unique needs and the services that have been designed to meet those needs. Special education and related services are provided at no cost to parents.

does not permit a student to be removed from education in age-appropriate general education classrooms solely because he or she needs modifications to be made in the general education curriculum.

Supplementary aids and services. Given that intellectual disabilities affect learning, it's often crucial to provide supports to students with ID in the classroom. This includes making *accommodations* appropriate to the needs of the student. It also includes providing what IDEA calls "supplementary aids and services." Supplementary aids and services are supports that may include instruction, personnel, equipment, or other accommodations that enable children with disabilities to be educated with nondisabled children to the maximum extent appropriate.

Thus, for families and teachers alike, it's important to know what changes and accommodations are helpful to students with intellectual disabilities. These need to be discussed by the IEP team and included in the IEP, if appropriate.

Some common changes that help students with intellectual disabilities are listed in the "Tips for Teachers" box on the next page. The organizations listed in the Resource Section also offer a great deal of information on ways to help children with intellectual disabilities learn and succeed in school. And you can also consult NICHCY, beginning online at: <http://nichcy.org/schoolage/accommodations/>

To access special education services for a school-aged child in your area, get in touch with your local public school system. Calling the elementary school in your neighborhood is an excellent place to start.

There is a lot to know about the special education process, much of which you can learn at NICHCY, which offers a wide range of publications on the topic. Enter our special education information at: <http://nichcy.org/schoolage/>

Educational Considerations

A child with an intellectual disability can do well in school but is likely to need the individualized help that's available as special education and related services. The level of help and support that's needed will depend upon the degree of intellectual disability involved.

General education. It's important that students with intellectual disabilities be involved in, and make progress in, the general education curriculum. That's the same curriculum that's learned by those without disabilities. Be aware that IDEA

Adaptive skills. Many children with intellectual disabilities need help with adaptive skills, which are skills needed to live, work, and play in the community. Teachers and parents can help a child work on these skills at both school and home. Some of these skills include:

- communicating with others;
- taking care of personal needs (dressing, bathing, going to the bathroom);
- health and safety;
- home living (helping to set the table, cleaning the house, or cooking dinner);
- social skills (manners, knowing the rules of conversation, getting along in a group, playing a game);
- reading, writing, and basic math; and
- as they get older, skills that will help them in the workplace.

Transition planning. It's extremely important for families and schools to begin planning early for the student's transition into the world of adulthood. Because intellectual disability affects how quickly and how well an individual learns new information and skills, the sooner transition planning begins, the more can be accomplished before the student leaves secondary school.

IDEA requires that, at the latest, transition planning for students with disabilities must begin no later than the first IEP to be in effect when they turn 16. The IEP teams of many students with intellectual disabilities feel

that it's important for these students to begin earlier than that. And they do.



Tips for Teachers

Learn as much as you can about intellectual disability. The organizations listed on this page will help you identify techniques and strategies to support the student educationally. We've also listed some strategies below.

Recognize that you can make an enormous difference in this student's life! Find out what the student's strengths and interests are, and emphasize them. Create opportunities for success.

If you are not part of the student's IEP team, ask for a copy of his or her IEP. The student's educational goals will be listed there, as well as the services and classroom accommodations he or she is to receive. Talk to others in your school (e.g., special educators), as necessary. They can help you identify effective methods of teaching this student, ways to adapt the curriculum, and how to address the student's IEP goals in your classroom.

Be as concrete as possible. Demonstrate what you mean rather than giving verbal directions. Rather than just relating new information verbally, show a picture. And rather than just showing a picture, provide the student with hands-on materials and experiences and the opportunity to try things out.

Break longer, new tasks into small steps. Demonstrate the steps. Have the student do the steps, one at a time. Provide assistance, as necessary.

Give the student immediate feedback.

Teach the student life skills such as daily living, social skills, and occupational awareness and exploration, as appropriate. Involve the student in group activities or clubs.

Work together with the student's parents and other school personnel to create and implement an IEP tailored to meet the student's needs. Regularly share information about how the student is doing at school and at home.



CEUs for Teachers

Tips for Parents



- ❑ Learn about intellectual disability. The more you know, the more you can help yourself and your child. See the list of organizations on page 5.
- ❑ Be patient, be hopeful. Your child, like every child, has a whole lifetime to learn and grow.
- ❑ Encourage independence in your child. For example, help your child learn daily care skills, such as dressing, feeding him or herself, using the bathroom, and grooming.
- ❑ Give your child chores. Keep her age, attention span, and abilities in mind. Break down jobs into smaller steps. For example, if your child's job is to set the table, first ask her to get the right number of napkins. Then have her put one at each family member's place at the table. Do the same with the utensils, going one at a time. Tell her what to do, step by step, until the job is done. Demonstrate how to do the job. Help her when she needs assistance.
- ❑ Give your child frequent feedback. Praise your child when he or she does well. Build your child's abilities.
- ❑ Find out what skills your child is learning at school. Find ways for your child to apply those skills at home. For example, if the teacher is going over a lesson about money,

take your child to the supermarket with you. Help him count out the money to pay for your groceries. Help him count the change.

- ❑ Find opportunities in your community for social activities, such as scouts, recreation center activities, sports, and so on. These will help your child build social skills as well as to have fun.
- ❑ Talk to other parents whose children have an intellectual disability. Parents can share practical advice and emotional support. Visit NICHCY's State-Specific Resources page and find a parent group near you. Look in the Disability-Specific section, under "intellectual disabilities." State Sheets are online at:
<http://nichcy.org/state-organization-search-by-state>
- ❑ Meet with the school and develop an IEP to address your child's needs. Keep in touch with your child's teachers. Offer support. Find out how you can support your child's school learning at home.
- ❑ Take pleasure in your beautiful one. He—she—is a treasure. Learn from your child, too. Those with intellectual disabilities have a special light within—let it shine.

Multiple Disabilities

Sharon's Story

Sharon is an active five year old who loves to spend time with her grandmother. She also loves to fingerpaint and play with the family dog. Sharon has multiple disabilities. When she was born, she didn't get enough oxygen. As a result, she has an intellectual disability, problems with mobility, and a speech impairment that makes it hard to understand what she's saying. That doesn't stop Sharon from chattering, though. She has a lot to say.

For Sharon's parents, it's been a long road from Sharon's birth to today. When she was just a baby, she began receiving special services called *early intervention*. These services help children with disabilities from birth to their third birthday. In early intervention, Sharon learned to crawl and to stand and—finally!—to walk with braces.

Now in preschool, Sharon receives *special education services*. Like early intervention, these services are meant to address her special learning needs. Her parents are very involved. They sit down often with the preschool staff and talk about Sharon's progress. The team also talks about Sharon's challenges and how to address them. Last week, for example, Sharon got a picture board to help her communicate. She's busy learning to use it.

Sharon's parents know that Sharon will always need some support because of her multiple disabilities. But her parents also know how determined Sharon can be when she's learning something new. She's going to learn it, by golly, there's no stopping her.

Causes of Multiple Disabilities

Having multiple disabilities means that a person has more than one disability. What caused the disabilities? Often, no one knows.

With some children, however, the cause *is* known. For example, Sharon's disabilities were caused by a lack of oxygen at birth. Other causes can include:

- Chromosomal abnormalities
- Premature birth
- Difficulties *after* birth

- Poor development of the brain or spinal cord
- Infections
- Genetic disorders
- Injuries from accidents¹

Whatever the cause, the result is that the child has multiple disabilities. Fortunately, there's help available. Keep reading to find out more.

Multiple Disabilities Aren't All the Same

The term *multiple disabilities* is general and broad. From the term, you can't tell:

- *how many* disabilities a child has;
- *which* disabilities are involved; or
- *how severe* each disability is.

Many combinations of disabilities are possible. For example, one child with multiple disabilities may have an intellectual disability and deafness. Another child may have cerebral palsy and autism. Sharon, above, had three different disabilities. All have multiple disabilities—but oh, such different ones!

To support, parent, or educate a child with multiple disabilities, it's important to know:

- which individual disabilities are involved;
- how severe (or moderate or mild) each disability is; and
- how each disability can affect learning and daily living.

The different disabilities will also have a *combined* impact. That's why it's also important to ask: How does the *combination* of these disabilities affect the child's learning, balance, use of the senses, thinking, and so on?

Have you recently learned that your child has multiple disabilities?

If so, you may find it helpful to read two articles on our website:

New to disability?

<http://nichcy.org/families-community/new-to-disability>

You are not alone

<http://nichcy.org/families-community/notalone/>

The answer will help parents and involved professionals decide what types of supports and services the child needs now and in the future.

Help for Children with Multiple Disabilities

When children have multiple disabilities, they are often eligible for the type of help that Sharon, our story girl, is receiving. In fact, more than 8,000 children in preschool (ages 3-5) received special education and related services in the U.S. in the Fall of 2011 because of their multiple disabilities.² More than 125,000 school-aged children did, too.³

For babies and toddlers | When a baby is born with multiple disabilities, his or her parents should know that there's a lot of help available—and immediately. Shortly after the diagnosis of multiple disabilities is made, parents will want to get in touch with the early intervention system in their community. We'll tell you how in a moment.

Early intervention is a system of services that helps infants and toddlers with disabilities (until their 3rd birthday) and their families. Early intervention services are available in every state and territory, as required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). These services may be provided on a sliding-fee basis. This means that the costs to the family will depend upon their income.

- To access early intervention services in your area, consult NICHCY's State Organizations page, online at: <http://nichcy.org/state-organization-search-by-state>

There, select your state. Then use the drop-down menu to select "State Agencies." You'll get a list of State Agencies in your state. Look for the title "Early Intervention." The agency listed beneath will be able to put you in contact with the early intervention program in your community.

- To learn more about early intervention, visit NICHCY at: <http://nichcy.org/babies/overview/>

For children in school | IDEA also requires that special education and related services be made available to every eligible child with multiple disabilities. This includes preschoolers (ages 3-21). These services are specially designed to address the child's individual needs associated with the disabilities. The services are provided at no cost to families.

- To access special education services for a school-aged child with multiple disabilities, get in touch with your local school system. Calling the elementary school in your neighborhood is an excellent place to start.
- To learn more about special education (and there's a lot to know!), visit NICHCY. Find our special education information at: <http://nichcy.org/schoolage/>

IDEA's Definition

Speaking of IDEA, this very important federal law defines the term *multiple disabilities*.

Multiple disabilities...
...means concomitant [simultaneous] impairments (such as intellectual disability-blindness, intellectual disability-orthopedic impairment, etc.), the combination of which causes

such severe educational needs that they cannot be accommodated in a special education program solely for one of the impairments. The term does not include deaf-blindness. [§300.8(c)(7)]

As you can see, there's more to IDEA's definition of multiple disabilities than having more than one impairment or disability. A key part of the definition is that the *combination of disabilities* causes the student to have severe educational needs. In fact, those educational needs must be severe enough that they cannot be addressed by providing special education services for only one of the impairments.

The federal definition of multiple disabilities gives two examples of possible combinations of disabilities:

- intellectual disability and blindness; and
- intellectual disability and orthopedic impairment.

But these are just examples. A child may have another combination of disabilities that causes severe educational needs—cerebral palsy and autism, for example, or blindness and an emotional disturbance. Whatever the combination is, a child served under IDEA's category of "multiple disabilities" will have a special education program that is designed to address the educational needs that arise from *all* of the child's disabilities, not just one.

Note that IDEA does not include deaf-blindness as an example of multiple disabilities. That's because deaf-blindness is defined separately and is a disability category of its own under IDEA.

Beyond the Federal Definition

So, what level of educational need is considered "severe enough" to make a student with multiple disabilities eligible for special education? Each state defines this for itself. So

it's important to know your state's definition of multiple disabilities. It's also important to know:

- how *each* disability affects the child's learning and functioning, and
- how the *combination* of disabilities does as well.

NICHCY offers many fact sheets on disabilities. To learn more about specific disabilities, visit our *Fact Sheets* page, at: <http://nichcy.org/disability/specific>

Bear in mind that it's hard to say how a *combination* of specific disabilities will affect an individual child. That will depend on the disabilities involved and their severity.

The Evaluation Process

An in-depth evaluation of the child must be conducted (with parental consent) before any services or supports may be provided under IDEA. This evaluation is free of charge to families. Its purpose is to gather detailed information about:

- the nature and extent of the child's disabilities; and
- the educational or developmental needs resulting from those disabilities.

With information from the evaluation, parents and involved professionals can then work together to decide what services and supports the child will receive, given his or her individual needs.

This is a very brief overview of the evaluation process under IDEA. To learn more about this vital step, visit NICHCY's discussion at: <http://nichcy.org/schoolage/evaluation>

Supporting Children with Multiple Disabilities

Most children with multiple disabilities will need some level of help and support throughout their lives. How *much* support a child needs will depend on the disabilities involved. A child with mild multiple disabilities may only need intermittent support (meaning, support is needed every now and again, or for particular tasks). Children with multiple, more severe disabilities are likely to need ongoing support.

Support in major life activities

| When considering what supports a child needs, it's helpful to think about major life activities. "Major life activities" include activities such as:

- caring for oneself;
- performing manual tasks;
- seeing, hearing, eating, and sleeping;
- walking, standing, lifting, and bending;
- speaking and communicating;
- breathing;
- learning;
- reading;
- concentrating and thinking; and
- working.⁴

Are any of these major life activities a challenge for the child because of his or her disabilities? Five-year-old Sharon has difficulties with caring for herself, walking, standing, and communicating. Her intellectual disability makes learning, reading, concentrating, and thinking a challenge. Not surprisingly, these are the areas where Sharon needs extensive support. Only time will tell how much support she'll need as she grows older.

Tips for Parents

Learn about *each* of your child's disabilities. The more you know, the more you can help yourself and your child. To identify organizations that specialize in each of your child's disabilities, visit NICHCY's *National Organizations Gateway*, at: <http://nichcy.org/org-gateway>

Love and play with your child. Treat your son or daughter as you would a child without disabilities. Take your child places, read together, have fun.

Know your child's needs, play to his or her strengths. Each child with multiple disabilities has learning needs, yes, but each also has his or her own set of skills, strengths, interests, enthusiasms, and preferences. These can be used to motivate your child and enrich learning, growth, and individuality.

Don't let the labels get you down. What terms should you use to describe your child's disabilities? There may be many to choose from (e.g., delay, developmental disability, cerebral palsy, physical disability, speech or language disorder, multiple disabilities), and each one describes a different aspect of your child. Learn to understand and be comfortable with using each one. This will help you be an advocate for your child and his or her unique gifts and challenges.

Encourage your child to be independent. For example, help your son or daughter learn self-care skills such as getting dressed, grooming, and doing laundry.

Team with the professionals working with your child. As a parent, you have the right to participate in team meetings where your child's education or program is being planned. Be there. Share your unique knowledge of who your son or daughter is; advocate that the program address your child's needs.

Investigate assistive technology (AT). AT is appropriate, even essential, for many children

with multiple disabilities. Without AT, there may be many tasks they simply cannot do or will have difficulty doing. Computers, augmentative/alternative communication systems, communication boards, head sticks, and adaptive switches are just some examples of helpful AT. Visit the Family Center on Technology and Disability to learn more about which AT devices may be useful to your child: <http://www.fctd.info>

Practice and reinforce. Do your child's disabilities affect his or her intellectual functioning? If so, he or she will be slower to learn new things and will have difficulty applying that learning in new situations. Be concrete. Give lots of hands-on opportunities for learning and practice. Give feedback immediately. Repeat the learning task in different settings.

Give your child chores. Keep in mind his or her age, mental capacity, attention span, and abilities. If necessary, divide tasks into small steps. Explain what your child is supposed to do, step by step, until the chore is done. Demonstrate. Offer help when it's needed and praise when things go well.

Find out what your child is learning at school. Look for ways to apply it at home. For example, if the teacher is reviewing concepts of money, take your child to the supermarket with you to help keep track of what money you're spending.

Look for social opportunities in the community (such as Scouts) or activities offered through the department of sports and leisure. Joining in and taking part will help your child develop social skills and have fun.

Talk with other parents whose children have disabilities—especially those who have one or more of the same disabilities as your child. Other parents can be a fountain of practical advice and emotional support. Visit the websites of the disability organizations you've identified to see if they have a parent group nearby.

You can also identify parent groups in your area by consulting NICHCY's *State Organizations* page (see the box below). We also suggest reading *Parent Groups*, available online at: <http://nichcy.org/families-community/help/parentgroups>

Be patient, be hopeful. Your child, like every child, has a whole lifetime to learn and grow.

Tips for Teachers

Know the needs, play to the strengths.

Each student with multiple disabilities will have his or her own set of skills, strengths, and learning needs. Learning more about each disability of the student will be helpful in addressing those learning needs. Also find out more about the student's strengths and interests, enthusiasms, and preferences. These can be used to motivate the student and enrich the education he or she receives. Parents are a great source of this information. So is the student!

Be familiar with the student's IEP. If you have a student with multiple disabilities in

your class, chances are that he or she has an individualized education program (IEP). The IEP will spell out the educational and functional goals to be worked on. You may have been part of the team that developed the IEP. If not, it's important to be familiar with what the student's IEP requires. Ask for a copy. Consult with administrators and other teachers, as needed, to make sure that the supports and services listed in the IEP are provided.

Make modifications. Students with multiple disabilities often need substantial modifications and accommodations in the classroom. This will help them access the general education curriculum at a grade-appropriate level. Find out about accommodations at: <http://nichcy.org/schoolage/accommodations>

Let the IEP team know what program supports or modifications you need. The student's IEP can include program modifications and supports for school personnel. Read more about this at: <http://nichcy.org/schoolage/iep/iepcontents/modifications-personnel>

Finding Organizations for Parents

There are many organizations in your state that can be especially helpful to parents of children with disabilities. Visit NICHCY's *State Organizations* page to identify what's available in your area. Go to: <http://nichcy.org/state-organization-search-by-state>

Select your state. From the drop-down menu, select "Organizations for Parents." Submit your search. Results will include several key parent organizations, including:

- The **Parent Training and Information Center (PTI)** for your state and possibly the **Community Parent Resource Center (CPRC)**. PTIs and CPRCs know the relevant resources in your state and community. They can also give you information about disabilities, the educational rights of your child, or strategies for being an effective advocate for your child.
- The **Parent to Parent** program in your state. The P2P program matches parents in one-on-one relationships for sharing information, experiences, and emotional and practical support.

Our *State Lists* will give you the address and contact information for the main state office of these organizations. Often, they also have local offices. So, even if the main office isn't located nearby, check to see if there's a satellite office in your area. Very often, there is!

Allow partial participation, as necessary.

Partial participation means that students with multiple disabilities aren't excluded from activities because they might not be able to complete a task fully or independently. Modifications can be made to the task itself or to how students participate.

Consider assistive technology (AT). AT is appropriate, even essential, for many students with multiple disabilities. Without AT, there may be many tasks they simply cannot perform or will have difficulty performing. Computers, augmentative/alternative communication systems, and communication boards are just some examples of helpful AT.

Visit the Family Center on Technology and Disability to learn more about which AT devices may be useful to a given student:
<http://www.fctd.info>



Does the student need textbooks in another format?

IDEA requires that students with print disabilities be provided with accessible instructional materials. There are many disabilities that affect a student's ability to use print materials; does your student have one such disability? If so, visit the National AIM Center, to learn where and how to get textbooks and workbooks that your student will be able to use: <http://aim.cast.org/>

Practice and reinforce. Do your student's disabilities affect his or her intellectual functioning? If so, he or she will be slower to learn new things and will have difficulty applying that learning in new situations. Be concrete; give lots of hands-on opportunities for learning and practice. Give feedback immediately. Repeat the learning task in different settings.

Support related services in the classroom.

Depending on the student's disabilities, he or she may need related services to benefit from special education. Related services may include speech-language therapy, occupational therapy,

physical therapy, or orientation and mobility services. It's best practice to provide these services in the classroom during the natural routine of the school, although some may be provided in other settings. Work with the related services personnel, as appropriate. Learn more about the related services your student receives or may need at: <http://nichcy.org/schoolage/iep/iepcontents/relatedservices/>

Address behavior issues. Behavior can be affected by having disabilities, especially a combination of disabilities. If a student's behavior is affecting his or her learning or the learning of others, IDEA requires that behavior be addressed in the IEP. Is this a problem area for your student?

Learn what the law requires and effective strategies for addressing behavior issues in our *Behavior Suite*: <http://nichcy.org/schoolage/behavior>

A paraprofessional in your classroom? Some students with multiple disabilities will require the support of an aide or paraprofessional. If this is so for your student, it helps to know about working with paraprofessionals. NICHCY offers a *Para* page, which paraprofessionals may also find useful, at: <http://nichcy.org/schools-administrators/paras>

Encourage the student's independence. It's natural to want to help a student who's struggling to do a task single-handedly, especially when you know there's a disability involved. But it's important for the child to develop the skills it takes to live as independently as possible, now and in the future.

When the time comes, support transition planning. IDEA requires that IEP teams and students plan ahead for the student's transition from school to the adult world. There's a lot to know about transition planning. When the time comes for the student to begin planning, have a look at our *Transition Suite*: <http://nichcy.org/schoolage/transitionadult>



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