

Facts about developmental disabilities

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Developmental disabilities are disabilities that affect an individual's intelligence and ability to perform daily life activities. There are different degrees of developmental disability: everything from very serious disabilities to being able to live an independent life with only some support.

People with developmental disabilities are unique individuals with various talents, personalities, strengths, weaknesses and needs, just like everyone else. However, a developmental disability means a slower rate of development in the childhood and adolescent years, and remains a factor throughout life. It leads to difficulties in receiving and processing information, acquiring knowledge and making use of acquired knowledge.

Developmental disabilities also decrease the ability to adapt to one's environment and to manage daily life activities, such as looking after your home and managing your finances.

Approximately 1% of the population have a developmental disability. It is common that people with developmental disabilities also have other disabilities, for example physical disabilities, cerebral palsy, autism, impaired vision or impaired hearing.

In addition to the term developmental disability; the terms learning disability, mental retardation, intellectual disability or cognitive disability are sometimes used.

Diagnostic criteria

In order to establish the diagnosis of developmental disability, an assessment is conducted by a physician and a psychologist, among others. They usually refer to the diagnostic criteria in a diagnostic manual called DSM-IV-TR (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders). In the manual, the term mental retardation is used.

The diagnostic criteria in DSM-IV-TR are:

- A. An intellectual level clearly below average, i.e. an IQ of 70 or less.
- B. Simultaneous limitation or impairment in two or more of the following areas of adaptive behaviour: communication, ADL skills, housing, social/interpersonal skills, use of public resources, planning skills, studies, work, leisure time, health and personal safety.
- C. Onset before the age of 18.

In the manual, developmental disability is categorised as mild (IQ 55-70), moderate (IQ 40-55), severe (IQ 25-40) and profound (IQ < 25) based on the intellectual ability, which is measured by intelligence tests.

However, the usefulness of this categorisation is under discussion. There is another definition of developmental disability proposed by the AAMR (American Association on Mental Retardation). It is similar to DSM-IV-TR, but emphasises that developmental disabilities are not only a characteristic of the individual, but also has to be

viewed in relation to the prerequisites and demands that exist in their environment. This means that you may be more or less disabled depending on how complicated your environment is and how people approach you.

Causes

There are a number of causes of developmental disability: hereditary factors, genetic damage, diseases and injuries during pregnancy or labour. Furthermore, injuries and diseases during childhood may lead to brain damage which can also cause developmental disabilities. Down's syndrome is the most common cause of developmental disorder. We now know more about the causes than before, but it is not always possible to determine the cause of an individual's developmental disability.

Children

Developmental disability manifests itself differently in every child. Children with developmental disabilities develop like other children in several areas, although at a slower pace. Basic needs and emotions are the same as for all children, but children with developmental disabilities may have more difficulties expressing their needs. Children with severe developmental disability may lack the ability to speak, and children with milder developmental disabilities often have delayed speech and language development. This places demands on the children's environment to be able to interpret and understand their communication. You often have to use supplementary communication support, such as signs

or pictures. Children with developmental disabilities also need more support and encouragement from grown-ups than other children.

Adolescents and adults

People with developmental disabilities all have in common that they experience and understand their surroundings more concretely than others. They often have difficulties using and interpreting abstract symbols such as numbers and letters.

Furthermore, they often have difficulties planning, controlling and assessing their own actions in various situations. This means that they have more or less difficulties with adjusting, evaluating and changing their own behaviour. In daily life activities, this may manifest itself in a lack of initiative, such as getting around to doing things, or knowing when to finish.

Most people with developmental disabilities need support their entire life, in order to manage their daily life activities. Many live in group housing and have an adjusted daily activity, while others may live a relatively independent life and have their own home with support from home-help services.

People with developmental disabilities develop throughout their entire life. They encounter new experiences, and their needs change. This means that the support given must be continuously reviewed and adjusted in order to function well and contribute to the individual's development.