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What's IN A Name?

EPILEPSY • AUTISM • CEREBRAL PALSY • IMPAIRMENT • MENTAL RETARDATION • SENSORY



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A LOOK AT THE TERM DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITY

In communities across America, every day, there are millions of people living, working, going to school, making friends, changing tires, using computers, cooking dinner, tucking their children into bed at night. And they're doing these everyday tasks with a developmental disability.

You may or may not notice the disability when you meet them. For some, it's a learning problem. For others it's a physical condition that causes them to use a wheelchair or crutches. For many, it is a more substantial disability that causes them to rely on others for assistance with everyday tasks.

What exactly is a developmental disability? How is it different from disabilities in general? And who is affected by these conditions?

We hope to answer these questions and more through this short primer on developmental disabilities. We'll start with a basic question.

WHAT IS A DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITY?

It's a mental or physical impairment, or a combination of both. What makes it different from other kinds of disabilities is that it first appears during a person's developmental years, before age 22. It usually lasts a lifetime. For many, the developmental disability will substantially restrict their ability to communicate with others, control their body movements and functions, learn, direct their own lives or live independently. As a result, many people with developmental disabilities need individual assistance and services from various agencies throughout their lives.

WHAT ARE THE CAUSES OF DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES?

The causes are numerous. Some people are born with a developmental disability. This could be the result of genetic defects, incomplete development or brain damage before birth, or brain damage at or shortly after birth. Others acquire their disability during childhood or early adulthood. Causes for them could be damage to the central nervous system, socio-economic deprivation or late-appearing genetic defects. The causes of other disabilities are still unknown. However, it should be noted that developmental disabilities are not contagious.

WHAT ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF CONDITIONS THAT CAN BE DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES?

- Epilepsy
- Cerebral Palsy
- Mental Retardation
- Spina Bifida
- Specific learning disability
- Sensory impairments (visual and hearing)
- Autism
- Tourette Syndrome



HERE IS A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF EACH OF THESE TERMS:

EPILEPSY

Epilepsy refers to the tendency to have repeating seizures. Seizures are temporary states of abnormal brain function. They are caused by sudden and unusual discharges of electrical energy in the brain, which may affect consciousness, movement, emotional behavior and sensory perception. Epilepsy is usually a lifelong condition that cannot be cured, but can often be controlled with proper medication.



CEREBRAL PALSY

Cerebral Palsy is caused by damage to the part of the brain that controls and coordinates muscle movement. It results in exaggerated, uncontrolled or unnecessary muscle movements, or muscle under-activity. Cerebral palsy can range from slight to very severe. For example, some people with the condition may have only slight awkwardness of movement. Others may have great difficulty with such tasks as walking, reaching, moving their mouths and speaking.

SPINA BIFIDA

Spina Bifida, or open spine, is a physical condition that affects the development of the spinal cord before birth, causing permanent damage to certain nerves. The resulting physical disability can range from minor movement loss to paraplegia. Because most people with spina bifida have some paralysis of their legs, they usually need braces, crutches or a wheelchair to move around.

SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITY

Specific Learning Disability is a disorder that affects a person's learning process usually without affecting their general intelligence. A person with this disability may have difficulty listening, thinking, reading, speaking, writing, spelling or doing mathematical calculations. The degree of disability may vary from mild to severe. But with help from special techniques, individuals with specific learning disabilities are quite capable of learning. In fact, interestingly, people with this disorder often have average to above average intelligence.

AUTISM

Autism is a neurological disability that interferes with how people understand and communicate about what they see, hear, touch, smell, taste or otherwise sense. People with autism may appear to be out of touch with their environment. It causes severe problems for them in learning, communication, behavior and relationships. However, with proper supports and services, many persons with autism can learn social, language and work skills which enable them to live productive lives.

TOURETTE SYNDROME

Tourette Syndrome is a neurological disorder. It is characterized by involuntary muscle movements, uncontrollable vocal sounds or inappropriate words. These involuntary movements are called tics. They can range from facial tics, such as excessive eye blinking or nose twitching, to behaviors such as continuously clearing the throat, coughing, grunting or shouting. It is thought that Tourette Syndrome is caused by a chemical imbalance or abnormality in the part of the brain that regulates movement and behavior. Several medications are used to control this disorder.



MENTAL RETARDATION

Mental Retardation is probably the most well-known developmental disability. People with mental retardation have significantly lower than average intelligence. Eighty percent have mild retardation. They can attend school, have jobs, and often lead independent lives. The other 20 percent of people with retardation are considered to have severe or profound retardation. They often have more than one disability and have difficulty in learning.



SENSORY IMPAIRMENT

Sensory impairments fall into two categories: visual and hearing. Visual impairments occur when a problem with the eye or optic nerve prevents a person from seeing normally. A person might be partially sighted, but still able to read print with special equipment. Or, their sight might be severely limited to the degree that they cannot see and must read by Braille or use audio tapes and records. Many people with visual impairments also use canes or guide dogs for assistance.

Hearing impairment is a term used to describe any kind of hearing loss, regardless of the degree. A person who has difficulty hearing but who can, with or without use of a hearing aid, understand speech is said to be "hard-of-hearing." Deafness refers to the disability experienced by people whose hearing loss is so great they cannot understand speech through use of the ear alone, even with a hearing aid.



HOW MANY PEOPLE HAVE DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES?

Between three and four million Americans—1.8 percent of the population—have developmental disabilities. That means if you live in a city of 200,000 people, approximately 3,600 have developmental disabilities.

What determines whether a person with a developmental disability will be able to live successfully in the community?

In years past, most people with developmental disabilities were thought to be incapable of living on their own and were grouped together in institutions. There, it was believed, they could get the services they needed. Usually their only chance for community living was if their family chose to keep them at home, often without community support.

Over the last two decades, however, understanding about the abilities of people with developmental disabilities has changed. But changing attitudes based on these facts has been a slow process. Our society is making some progress in accepting and allowing people with developmental disabilities to function to their fullest capabilities. Some people are recognizing that individuals with developmental disabilities have hopes, dreams and desires for their lives...just like people without disabilities.

However, access to community life remains limited for many people with developmental disabilities. For many, there are no community or governmental services available. Opportunities for community participation are especially difficult for people with severe developmental disabilities who must depend on support from others. A person's chance to lead a life of community presence and participation depends not so much on the nature of his or her disability as on the attitudes and acceptance of neighbors, co-workers and friends.

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