



Empowering Children. Supporting Families. Building Brighter Futures.

Resource 010 | Neurodevelopmental conditions

Intellectual disability

What it means

Intellectual disability involves difficulties in intellectual functioning, such as reasoning and learning, together with limitations in adaptive everyday skills. It begins during the developmental period. Assessment considers practical, social, and conceptual functioning; a low test score alone is not enough to define a child's support needs. [1]

Causes and risk factors

Possible causes include genetic or chromosomal conditions, differences or injuries affecting brain development, metabolic conditions, certain infections, and significant prenatal or environmental exposures. Sometimes no cause is identified. Intellectual disability can coexist with autism, movement conditions, epilepsy, or sensory impairment, but these are not interchangeable diagnoses. [1,2]

General family education. A concern deserves assessment, but this guide does not diagnose a child or prescribe treatment.



Signs and everyday impact

A child may need substantially more support to learn concepts, generalize skills, communicate, or manage daily routines. In very young children, global developmental delay may be used while more reliable characterization develops. A child can have important strengths and show progress even when ongoing assistance is needed. [1,2]

Assessment and diagnosis

Assessment combines clinical history, suitable cognitive measures, adaptive functioning across settings, and examination of communication, hearing, vision, and movement access. Tests should fit language and cultural background. Medical and genetic investigations are individualized. Severity and services should be guided by functioning and support needs rather than an IQ number alone. [1,2]

Treatment and therapy

Care can include early intervention, accessible education, communication therapy and AAC, occupational or physical therapy, and treatment of associated medical concerns. Teaching often uses clear steps, demonstration, repetition, and opportunities to practice in real routines. Individual goals should support participation, choice, and growing independence. There is no universal medicine that treats intellectual disability itself. [1,2,3]

Support at home

Use simple, respectful explanations, predictable routines, and enough processing time. Offer meaningful choices and recognize the child's interests. Teach one step at a time, then practice in different familiar settings. Keep expectations challenging but achievable, with support rather than pressure.

When to seek help

Regression, new seizures, significant changes in alertness, or emerging feeding or breathing difficulties need prompt medical review rather than being attributed to the existing diagnosis.

Questions for your care team

- How were cognitive and adaptive skills assessed fairly?
- What support needs are most important for everyday participation?
- Which medical or genetic findings could change care?



Podcast preparation

Use this outline to develop a later podcast script.

Suggested opening

Welcome to Mariel Early Intervention. Today we discuss intellectual disability. Intellectual disability involves difficulties in intellectual functioning, such as reasoning and learning, together with limitations in adaptive everyday skills. This is general education; each child needs individualized care.

Opening: Define the topic and its developmental context.

Understanding: Explain causes and signs without inviting self-diagnosis.

Assessment: Describe evaluation and distinguish screening from diagnosis.

Support: Discuss treatment, therapy, and practical family supports.

Closing: Explain urgent signs and one clear next step.

Misconception to address: Intellectual disability does not mean a child cannot learn or make choices.

Before recording: update clinical references and local service details, arrange clinical review, and use fully consented or fictional examples.

Terms in plain language

- Intellectual functioning: reasoning, learning, and problem solving.
- Adaptive functioning: everyday practical and social skills.
- Generalization: using a learned skill in another setting.

Sources and further reading

Sources accessed 3 October 2026. Numbered references support the clinical overview. Treatment availability and referral routes vary by country.

[1] About Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDDs)

<https://www.nichd.nih.gov/health/topics/idds/conditioninfo>

[2] Intellectual Disability

<https://www.asha.org/practice-portal/clinical-topics/intellectual-disability/>

[3] Assessing Developmental Delays in Children

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/toddler/Pages/Assessing-Developmental-Delays.aspx>