

Severe and/or Multiple Disabilities

Definition

People with severe disabilities are those who traditionally have been labelled as having severe to profound cognitive impairments or mental retardation. Although, there is growing understanding that any and all disabilities may affect individuals along a scale of minimal or mild to severe. It is possible to have a mild learning disability or a severe one; mild or severe autism, without a clear-cut diagnosis of intellectual disability. The greater the severity or impact on an individual, there is a greater likelihood for increased need for supports. Often, individuals with a severe disability require ongoing, extensive support in more than one major life activity in order to enjoy the quality of life available to people with fewer or no disabilities and to participate in integrated community settings. They may also have additional significant disabilities, including movement difficulties, sensory losses, and/or behavior problems.

Incidence

In the 2002-2003 school year, the states reported to the U.S. Department of Education that they were providing services to 140,209 students with multiple disabilities (*Twenty-sixth Annual Report to Congress*, U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

Characteristics

People with severe or multiple disabilities may exhibit a wide range of characteristics, depending on the combination and severity of disabilities, and the person's age. There are, however, some traits they may share, including:

- Limited speech or communication;

- Difficulty in basic physical

- mobility; Tendency to forget skills

- through disuse;

- Trouble generalizing skills from one situation to another; and/or

- A need for support in major life activities (e.g., domestic, leisure, community use, vocational).

Implications

A variety of medical problems may accompany severe disabilities. Examples include seizures, sensory loss, hydrocephalus, and scoliosis. These conditions should be considered when establishing school services. A multi-disciplinary team consisting of the student's parents, educational specialists, and medical specialists in the areas in which the individual demonstrates problems should work together to plan and coordinate necessary services.