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Missouri
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UNDERSTANDING DISABILITY CATEGORIES: *A Parent Guide*

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Understanding Disability Categories: *A Parent Guide*

What are “disability categories” in special education?

Disability categories are classifications used by schools to determine if a child is eligible for special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). These categories help schools understand the child’s unique needs and design an Individualized Education Program (IEP) to support their learning and development.

A child must meet criteria for one or more categories and need specialized instruction to qualify for an IEP. There are 13 official categories, each with specific criteria.

Here is a list of the categories and some of their characteristics:

Autism

- Affects communication, social interaction, and behavior
- May include repetitive behaviors, limited interests, or challenges with change
- Symptoms often appear before age 3

Deaf-Blindness

- A rare combination of hearing and vision loss
- Causes severe communication and learning difficulties
- Needs support in daily activities and specialized instruction





Deafness

- A severe hearing impairment that makes understanding spoken language very difficult, even with aids
- May affect communication, language development, and academic progress
- Often requires sign language, captioning, or other supports

Emotional Disturbance

- Includes mental health issues like anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, or behavioral disorders
- May show as poor relationships, inappropriate behavior, or trouble coping in school
- Impacts learning not due to intellectual ability

Hearing Impairment

- A partial or fluctuating hearing loss (not as severe as deafness)
- Can affect listening, language skills, and classroom participation
- Often supported with hearing aids or FM systems

Intellectual Disability

- Below-average intellectual functioning (IQ) and difficulties with everyday life skills
- Learning new concepts and problem-solving may take more time
- May require direct instruction and life skills training

Multiple Disabilities

- Two or more disabilities that cause significant educational needs (e.g., intellectual disability and orthopedic impairment)



- Needs are complex and cannot be met by services for one disability alone

Orthopedic Impairment

- Physical disabilities that affect movement, coordination, or strength
- May result from conditions like cerebral palsy, spina bifida, or amputations
- May need special seating, mobility aids, or therapy

Other Health Impairment

A wide category for chronic or acute health issues like:

- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, asthma, diabetes, epilepsy, or heart conditions.
- These affect alertness, strength, or energy and limit school performance.

Specific Learning Disability

- Difficulty in reading, writing, math, or other academic skills
- Child has average intelligence but struggles with learning in certain areas

Speech or Language Impairment

- Problems with speaking clearly, understanding or using language, or forming sounds
- Includes stuttering, articulation problems, and language delays
- Can affect classroom participation and communication





Traumatic Brain Injury

- An injury to the brain caused by an external force (e.g., car accident, fall)
- Can affect memory, focus, emotions, behavior, or learning
- Often requires ongoing support and re-learning of skills

Visual Impairment Including Blindness

- Partial or full loss of vision that affects learning
- May need Braille, magnification, or orientation and mobility training
- Impacts reading, writing, and access to visual information

Developmental Delay

In addition to the 13 categories, the category of “developmental delay” may be used for children through age 9 when a specific disability cannot be identified but there are significant delays in one or more of the following:

- Physical development
- Cognitive development
- Communication
- Social or emotional development
- Adaptive development

Still have questions?

Talk to your child’s case manager, school psychologist, or IEP team.





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How can I get help in my language?

Request interpreter services at your child's school or the school district's office. Request translated written information if needed. Information available to all parents in the school district should be available to you as well.



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