

Intellectual disability: the facts

Intellectual disability is a developmental disorder. People with intellectual disability have significantly more difficulty than others in learning new things, understanding concepts, solving problems, concentrating and remembering. Consequently, they require extra support to learn and achieve their full potential.

People with intellectual disability have the same rights and responsibilities as other members of the community, and if given the opportunity, have similar needs, hopes, aspirations and interests as people without disability.

What is intellectual disability?

The international definition for intellectual disability has three criteria:

- Significant limitations in intelligence—that is an intelligence quotient (IQ) of about 70 or less as measured on a standardised intellectual assessment.
- Significant limitations in the skills needed to live and work in the community including difficulties with communication, self care, social skills, safety and self-direction.
- Limitations in intelligence and living skills that are evident before the person is 18 years old.

All three criteria must be present for a person to be considered as having intellectual disability.

A formal assessment by a psychologist or other appropriately qualified professional is generally required to diagnose intellectual disability. This usually involves an intellectual assessment (IQ test) and assessment of the person's living skills. Living skills are normally assessed by asking a parent, teacher or someone else who knows the referred person well to fill out a questionnaire or participate in an interview.

For some people, intellectual disability occurs alongside other problems (for example sensory impairment, physical impairment and/or medical conditions). Some people may have dual disability, that is, intellectual disability and mental illness. These other problems are not a result of intellectual disability nor are they caused by intellectual disability. They are added issues to be considered when supporting a person with intellectual disability.

What causes intellectual disability?

There are many causes of intellectual disability. The most common are:

- **Genetic conditions**—Sometimes intellectual disability is caused by abnormal genes inherited from parents, errors when genes combine, or other reasons. Examples of genetic conditions are Down syndrome and Rhetts syndrome.

- **Problems during pregnancy**—Infections (such as rubella) or exposure to toxins (for example alcohol, drugs, mercury) can cause intellectual disability in an unborn child.
- **Problems at birth**—Problems during labour and birth, such as the child not getting enough oxygen, can result in intellectual disability.
- **Health problems**—Early childhood diseases such as whooping cough, measles or meningitis can cause intellectual disability.
- **Environmental factors**—Intellectual disability can also be caused by extreme malnutrition (not getting enough food), by being exposed to poisons, and so on.

How many people have intellectual disability?

About one per cent of the population is thought to have intellectual disability.

In South Australia approximately 6,800 people are registered with Disability Services as having intellectual disability. Intellectual disability cuts across the lines of racial, ethnic, educational, social and economic backgrounds. It can occur in any family.

The effect of intellectual disability

Unlike some medical problems, intellectual disability cannot be cured. However, with support, people can be helped to achieve their potential. This happens regardless of the level of intellectual disability they have.

Just as abilities vary among individuals in the community, the effects of intellectual disability vary.

Some people will be mildly affected in their ability to learn new information and skills. As children, their intellectual disability may not be readily apparent and may not become evident until they enter school. As adults, many people with mild intellectual disability will lead independent lives in the community.

Other people may be moderately to severely affected. This means that they have more difficulty learning and require greater levels of support to help them maximise their independence and participation in the community.

Early intervention, education, training and appropriate supports all contribute to people with intellectual disability leading full and satisfying lives.

Where to find information and help:

- Disability Information and Referrals:
 - 1300 786 117
 - disabilityinfo@dcsi.sa.gov.au
- General practitioners and paediatricians
- Child and Youth Health (www.cyh.sa.gov.au)
- School principals, teachers and counsellors.

