
Severe and/or Multiple Disabilities — National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities

Definition

People with severe disabilities are those who traditionally have been labeled as having severe to profound cognitive impairments or intellectual disabilities. Now, there's a growing understanding that disabilities can affect individuals along a scale of minimal or mild to severe. It is possible to have a mild learning disability or a severe one, just as it's possible to have mild or severe autism, without a clear-cut diagnosis of intellectual disability. Multiple disabilities, by its very name, means that an individual usually has more than one significant disability, such as movement difficulties, sensory loss, and/or a behavior or emotional disorder.

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. Ongoing supports may also be necessary to help individuals with severe or multiple disabilities to participate in integrated community settings.

[Back to Top](#)

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).

[Back to Top](#)

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).

[Back to Top](#)

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.