

Developmental Disabilities

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According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), “developmental disabilities are a group of conditions due to an impairment in physical, learning, language, or behavior areas.” The CDC estimates that approximately one in six children aged 3 through 17 in the United States have one or more developmental disabilities, as well as, other developmental delays (Boyle, et al., 2011). The term developmental disability is associated with the conditions of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorder, cerebral palsy, hearing loss, intellectual disability, learning disabilities, epilepsy, cerebral palsy, vision impairment, and other associated developmental delays.

There are multiple factors associated with the onset of developmental disability. A mix of social, environmental, and physical causes are considered contributory to the onset of a specific developmental disability. More specifically, several common factors that cause developmental disabilities include brain injury or infection during gestation or after birth, nutritional deficits, abnormalities of chromosomes and genes, and premature birth. Additionally, drug misuse during pregnancy, including excessive alcohol and smoking can potentially lead to a child with developmental disability. Developmental disabilities occur twice as often in males as in females, and researchers have found a prevalence of mild developmental disabilities to be likely higher in areas of poverty and deprivation (Boyle, et al., 2011). Life expectancy among those with developmental disabilities was found as a group to be estimated at 20 years below average, but with advancement in medical and adaptive technology, these same individuals are potentially living healthier and more fruitful lives.

Individuals with developmental disabilities may have multiple symptoms associated with the specific developmental disability diagnosed. With intellectual disability, individuals may have a difficulty learning general knowledge within their educational career, and difficulty learning adaptive behaviors both at home and school. Those who have been diagnosed with cerebral palsy generally have average to above average intelligence but have difficulty with bodily movement due to excessive muscle tightening, involuntary movements, poor motor coordination and tremors. Individuals with autism spectrum disorder have a varying degree of difficulty with symptoms, but the most common symptoms to occur are, difficulty with communication, social adjustment, exhibiting of typical emotions, repetitive or inflexible behaviors, and difficulty with sensory integration.

The CDC offers developmental milestone monitoring and screening to the public to offer a better understanding to parents for monitoring developmental growth in their children and to see if their child needs to be further evaluated by a professional for a possible condition associated with developmental disabilities. For parents, the CDC offers a milestone checklist tracker to see if their child is meeting developmental milestones on time. They also offer guides to early care providers, early intervention services, primary care providers (PCP), behavioral health providers, and child welfare, to promote universal screenings and identification of possible delays and concerns for children from birth to the age of 5 (“Facts About Developmental Disabilities,” 2015). If a child is suspected of having delays or neurological conditions associated with a developmental disability, they can be seen for further understanding and testing for disability by their PCP, a health care specialist such as a neurologist, and a neuropsychologist that can provide neuropsychological and psychological testing of the child’s current abilities.

As research and knowledge continue to unfold new aspects of developmental disabilities, additional services and support are offered by agencies to both those diagnosed and their families. In childhood, those with developmental disabilities can gain access to therapeutic services such as speech therapy, physical therapy, occupational therapy, and behavioral support. Support services are in place to address community inclusion and increase self-determination as those with developmental disabilities age. Those with developmental disabilities are able to have support at home and in the community through services that allow person-to-person assistance from a social worker on specific tasks of daily living such as budgeting or paying bills (Kormann, & Petronko, 2003). Additionally, services are provided for 24-hour support that assists with all aspects of daily living tasks such as household chores, cooking, showering, dressing, and assistance with medication.

Individuals diagnosed with a developmental disability are able to utilize the services of residential accommodations or group homes, living with others who have similar needs. Additional educational and training opportunities are given to those with developmental disabilities as they progress through school and move into the workforce. Employment support is offered through integrative employment that can include specific programs to increase skills for employment or to gain access to business opportunities. Finally, support is provided to those with developmental disabilities through advocacy where groups work collaboratively with those who have developmental disabilities for systemic change.

Further Reading

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