



Office of Developmental Primary Care

Improving outcomes for people with developmental disabilities

Definition of Developmental Disabilities

Disability is a natural part of the human experience. Differences in ability do not diminish the right of individuals to enjoy the opportunity for independence, productivity, integration and inclusion in the community. The law recognizes people with developmental disabilities require lifelong specialized services and assistance. To eliminate barriers and to meet the needs of people with disabilities, their families and caregivers, supports must be provided in a coordinated and culturally competent manner.

For the purposes of determining eligibility for services and supports the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Civil Rights Act of 2000 defines the term "developmental disability" as a severe, chronic disability of an individual that is attributable to a mental or physical impairment or combination of mental and physical impairments that are manifested before the individual attains age 22 and are likely to continue indefinitely. Developmental disabilities result in substantial limitations in three or more of the following functional areas: self-care, receptive and expressive language, learning, mobility, self-direction, capacity for independent living and economic self-sufficiency.

The term "developmental disability" is a social construct. The federal definition is based solely on function; however, many state definitions are based on specific diagnostic categories, such as cerebral palsy, autism, epilepsy, traumatic brain injury, and intellectual disability.

People with developmental disabilities have atypical neurological development which results in challenges in some or all of the following domains: 1) cognition, 2) sensory processing, 3) fine and gross motor skills, 4) seizure threshold and 5) behavior and mental health. Strengths and challenges in each of these areas need to be assessed for each individual. People with disabilities are at higher risk for secondary health conditions, such as obesity, falls, dental disease, and dysphagia. Many studies have documented high rates of health problems and hospitalizations among people with developmental disabilities. Studies that include health screenings demonstrate high rates of undetected medical problems that require action. People with developmental disabilities are medically underserved.

References

1. California Welfare and Institutions Code §4512.
2. Developmental Disabilities and Assistance Bill of Rights 2000. 42 USC 15001.
3. Odom SL, Horner RH, Snell ME, Blacher J, eds. *Handbook of Developmental Disabilities*. New York: The Guilford Press; 2007.
4. P. May, personal communication. The Five Essential Concepts of Developmental Medicine.

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