

Facts About Developmental Disabilities

WHAT ARE DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES?

Developmental disabilities are a variety of conditions that become apparent during childhood and cause mental or physical limitation. These conditions include autism, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, mental retardation, and other neurological impairments.

People with developmental disabilities may not learn as quickly as others or express themselves clearly. Others may have limited ability to take care of their physical needs or limited mobility. Many have more than one disability.

Developmental disabilities have a variety of causes, which can occur before, during or after birth. Those occurring before birth include genetic problems, poor prenatal care or exposure of the fetus to toxic elements, drugs or alcohol. Occurrences during birth, such as a cut off of oxygen to the baby, or accidents after birth, like car accidents causing traumatic brain injury, also can cause developmental disabilities.

It is difficult to define the limits of people with disabilities, as we continue to discover extraordinary abilities within them. While people who have developmental disabilities face a more challenging future than most, they still can enjoy a full and active life. What they need most is encouragement, understanding, and the willingness of other to help them maximize their opportunities for becoming part of their community.

WHAT IS MENTAL RETARDATION?

People with mental retardation show delays in learning, a slower pace of learning, and difficulty in applying learning. Approximately 200,000 people in New York are thought to have mental retardation.

Mental retardation can result from a variety of factors, among them premature birth, genetic abnormalities, malnutrition, exposure to toxic agents, and social deprivation.

Assistance for people with mental retardation usually includes diagnosis and help early in their life, family counseling and training, education, job training, and housing services. Virtually all people with mental retardation can learn to take care of their basic needs and to live in the community.

WHAT IS CEREBRAL PALSY?

Cerebral palsy is a group of conditions that result in limited or abnormal functioning in the parts of the brain that control movement. Cerebral palsy usually is caused by brain injury before or during birth. However, brain damage or injury at any time in life can have the same effect.

People with cerebral palsy primarily have difficulty with muscular coordination. They also may have seizures or be unable to see, speak, hear, or learn as other persons do. Severe speech problems are common, sometimes leading others to make the mistake of thinking that people with cerebral palsy have mental retardation. This often is not true.

Treatments for cerebral palsy include physical, occupational, and speech/language therapy by skilled professionals. In-home and out-of-home residential services are also available. About 24,000 New York residents have cerebral palsy.

WHAT IS EPILEPSY?

Epilepsy applies to numerous nervous system disorders that result in abnormal electrical discharges of brain cells. This produces seizures that may cause convulsive movements, or partial or total loss of consciousness. Only a small percentage of people with epilepsy also have mental retardation.

Scientific advances have made it possible to control many forms of epilepsy. As a result, most people with the condition lead normal lives. When medication is not effective, specialized medical services, vocational programs and in-home and out-of-home residential services are available. Nearly 60,000 New Yorkers are believed to have epilepsy.

WHAT IS AUTISM?

Autism is an extensive developmental disorder that limits learning and slows intellectual development. People with autism have great difficulty relating and responding to persons, events or objects.

People who have mild autism have very limited interests. They may demonstrate some repetitive actions and a marked lack of sensitivity to other people. People who have more severe autism have difficulty listening to and communicating with others. Their interactions with people can be confusing, or uncertain at best. They may have multiple repetitive behaviors, for example rocking and unusual hand movements, and can be highly resistant to change.

Autism's cause is still unknown, however most researchers believe it has a biological basis which is probably genetic. It often is possible to diagnose autism before someone is two years old. When a child fails to develop language abilities or shows a lack of desire to be around other people, professionals generally recommend the clinical examinations that can uncover autism. More than 7,000 people in New York have this disability.

Care and treatment for autism include diagnosis, parent training, highly structured recreation programs, specialized education, day treatment, in-home and out-of-home

residential services, and programs to develop daily living and social skills. Early diagnosis by a physician is important so that treatments such as highly structured behavioral programs can be used to improve each child's chances for development.

WHAT ARE NEUROLOGICAL IMPAIRMENTS?

Neurological impairments are a group of disabilities including disorders of the brain and central nervous system that considerably limit a person's development, understanding, memory, attention span, fine muscle control, use of language, or ability to adjust to new situations. Generally, these impairments begin during childhood or adolescence.

People with neurological impairments may experience a variety of learning difficulties or social behavior problems. They also may have special care needs because of problems in muscular control. Neurological impairments can be difficult to diagnose and to treat.

Approximately 34,000 people in New York State are thought to have some type of severe neurological impairment. Many of these people learn to compensate for these disabilities and do very well in life.

However, some people with neurological impairments may need specialized services similar to those available for other people with developmental disabilities.

Retrieved on 6/26/2006 from the OMRDD Website
http://www.omr.state.ny.us/document/hp_faqsdd.jsp