



Educational Assistance Center

History of Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month (DDAM)

The Disability Rights Movement

People with disabilities make up about 40.7 million Americans who live independent, fulfilling lives. Since the mid-1900s, the disability community has advocated for recognition, not just as individuals with disabilities, but as people with their own ideas, beliefs, dreams, and goals. Disability is one aspect of who they are, not their defining feature.

[Learn more about the history of the Disability Rights Movement](#)



Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month (DDAM)

March is Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month, established in 1987 by President Ronald Reagan. This month encourages awareness and support for individuals with developmental disabilities, helping them lead productive and fulfilling lives.

Presidential Proclamation: President Reagan's proclamation called for more opportunities for individuals with developmental disabilities to live and work in their communities.

Gubernatorial Proclamation: Governor Gavin Newsom's proclamation acknowledged the importance of inclusion, accessibility, and opportunities for individuals with developmental disabilities to thrive in their communities.

Understanding Developmental Disabilities

What Are Developmental Disabilities?

Developmental disabilities are a group of lifelong conditions that arise before adulthood and impact a person's learning, communication, mobility, self-care, and independence. These conditions can be physical, cognitive, or both and may affect daily life in varying ways.

Common Developmental Disabilities

- **Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)** – Affects attention, impulse control, and emotional regulation due to executive dysfunction.
- **Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)** – Affects social communication, sensory processing, and behavior, often leading to repetitive actions and difficulty understanding social cues.
- **Cerebral Palsy** – Affects movement, balance, and posture, making it the most common motor disability in childhood.
- **Down Syndrome** – A genetic condition caused by an extra chromosome 21, leading to physical and cognitive differences.
- **Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD)** – Caused by prenatal alcohol exposure, leading to cognitive and behavioral challenges.
- **Fragile X Syndrome** – A genetic disorder often linked to intellectual disability and autism, more common in males.
- **Intellectual Disability** – Defined by an IQ below 70, along with challenges in reasoning, problem-solving, and adaptive skills.
- **Learning Disabilities** – Includes dyslexia (reading difficulty), dyscalculia (math difficulty), dysgraphia (writing difficulty), and nonverbal learning disorder.
- **Tourette's Syndrome** – A neurological condition causing involuntary movements and vocal tics.

Early Detection & Lifelong Support

Developmental disabilities can often be identified early and persist throughout life. Some individuals may require ongoing educational, medical, and social support to enhance independence and quality of life.

Understanding Hidden Disabilities

What Are Hidden Disabilities?

Hidden disabilities, also known as invisible disabilities, are physical, mental, or neurological conditions that are not immediately apparent to others. These conditions can affect a person's movement, senses, communication, mental health, or daily activities, even if they do not use visible aids like a wheelchair or cane.

Examples include:

- Autism – Affects social interaction, communication, and sensory processing.
- Learning Disabilities (LD) – Impact reading, writing, math, and processing skills.
- Deaf or Hard of Hearing (DHH) – May require alternative communication methods.
- Vision Impairment – Can range from partial sight loss to complete blindness.
- Chronic Health Conditions – Such as arthritis, diabetes, chronic pain, or respiratory illnesses.

Because these disabilities are not always visible, individuals may face misunderstanding, skepticism, or lack of support in public spaces, workplaces, or educational settings.

The Hidden Disabilities Sunflower: A Symbol of Support

The Hidden Disabilities Sunflower is a globally recognized symbol that allows individuals to voluntarily indicate they have a hidden disability and may need extra time, support, or understanding.

By wearing the Sunflower, individuals can:

- Discreetly signal that they have a non-visible disability.
- Receive more patience, assistance, or accommodations.
- Raise awareness and encourage inclusivity in public spaces.

Developmental Disabilities

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

ADHD is a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects attention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity. It can impact daily life by making it harder to focus, stay organized, and control impulses.

Key Facts About ADHD

- Affects time management, task completion, and impulse control, which can impact school, work, and relationships. Despite these challenges, it is not related to intelligence.
- Often coexists with anxiety, learning disabilities, and mood disorders, making early recognition and support essential.
- Affects about 5-10% of children and 2-5% of adults worldwide, with symptoms often continuing into adulthood.
- Treatment options include behavioral therapy, medication, and lifestyle strategies to improve focus, organization, and self-regulation. With proper support, individuals with ADHD can thrive.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects social communication, behavior, and sensory processing. Since 2013, conditions like Asperger's syndrome and pervasive developmental disorder-not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS) have been merged into ASD.

Key Facts About Autism

- Affects about 1 in 100 children worldwide and often coexists with conditions like ADHD, epilepsy, and intellectual disability. Autism is a spectrum condition—some individuals are nonverbal, while others have strong verbal skills but struggle with social cues and sensory sensitivities.

- Not caused by vaccines—this is a widely debunked myth. While there is no cure, therapies like speech, occupational, and behavioral therapy can help develop life skills.
- Autism is viewed in different ways—some see it as a disability requiring support, while the neurodiversity movement considers it a natural variation in human thinking.
- Asperger’s syndrome was once considered a milder form of autism, but it was later merged into the broader autism spectrum to ensure access to autism-related support services. Though no longer an official diagnosis, some individuals still identify with the term.

Cerebral Palsy (CP)

Cerebral palsy (CP) is a group of movement disorders that affect muscle tone, coordination, and posture. It can also impact speech, vision, and hearing, with symptoms ranging from mild to severe.

Key Facts About Cerebral Palsy

- Caused by brain damage before, during, or shortly after birth, affecting movement, muscle control, and coordination.
- Symptoms range from muscle weakness and stiffness to involuntary movements, with some individuals also experiencing intellectual disabilities, seizures, or difficulties with speech and swallowing.
- While there is no cure, treatments like physical and occupational therapy, medication, and surgery can improve mobility and quality of life.
- With the right support and accommodations, many individuals with CP can lead independent and fulfilling lives.

Down Syndrome

Down syndrome, also known as trisomy 21, is a genetic condition caused by an extra copy of chromosome 21. It results in developmental delays, mild-to-moderate intellectual disability, and distinct physical features such as a flat facial profile and small ears.

Key Facts About Down Syndrome

- Occurs by chance, often with no family history, though the likelihood increases with maternal age (35 and older).
- Can affect speech, learning, and motor skills, but early intervention and support improve development and independence.
- May be associated with health conditions like heart defects, hearing loss, or thyroid issues, but regular medical care enhances quality of life.
- Many individuals graduate high school, pursue jobs or college, and live independently, with life expectancy now reaching 50-60 years with proper support.

Dyscalculia (Math Learning Disability)

Dyscalculia is a learning disability that affects math skills, making it difficult to understand numbers, perform calculations, and grasp mathematical concepts. It is sometimes mistakenly called "math dyslexia," though the two are distinct.

Key Facts About Dyscalculia

- Affects number sense, calculations, and problem-solving but is not related to overall intelligence.
- Occurs in 3–6% of the population and often coexists with ADHD, Turner syndrome, or spina bifida.
- Different from "acalculia," which is math difficulty caused by brain injury.
- Support includes specialized teaching strategies, assistive technology, and extra time for math-related tasks.

Dysgraphia

Dysgraphia is a neurological learning disability that affects writing ability, including handwriting, spelling, and written expression. It is considered a specific learning disability (SLD) and often coexists with ADHD, speech impairments, and dyspraxia.

Key Facts About Dysgraphia

- Impacts handwriting, spelling, and organizing thoughts on paper, affecting both motor skills and language processing.
- May cause difficulty with letter formation, spacing, writing speed, and overall written expression.
- Diagnosed when writing ability is significantly below expectations for age and education level, differing from agraphia, which results from brain injury or illness.
- Support includes assistive technology, speech-to-text tools, and specialized instruction to improve written communication.

Dyslexia

Dyslexia is a learning disability that affects reading, writing, and spelling. It is not related to intelligence or effort, and individuals with dyslexia have a strong desire to learn but process language differently.

Key Facts About Dyslexia

- Causes difficulties with spelling, reading fluency, sounding out words, and understanding text, with severity varying by individual.
- Frequently coexists with ADHD, developmental language disorders, and math difficulties, stemming from genetic and environmental factors affecting brain processing.
- Diagnosed through assessments of memory, vision, spelling, and reading skills, but does not impact intelligence.
- Support includes specialized teaching methods, but there is no "cure"; many individuals develop strategies to navigate reading and writing challenges.

Dyspraxia (Developmental Coordination Disorder - DCD)

Dyspraxia is a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects coordination and movement due to brain messages not being accurately transmitted to the body. This leads to difficulties with fine and gross motor skills, making daily tasks more challenging.

Key Facts About Dyspraxia

- Impacts coordination and motor skills, making tasks like handwriting, using utensils, and playing sports more challenging.
- Often coexists with difficulties in organization, attention, memory, and time management but is not related to intelligence.
- Affects about 5% of the population and can impact self-esteem due to struggles with everyday activities.
- Occupational therapy and targeted interventions can improve coordination and daily functioning, though dyspraxia remains widely unrecognized as a disability.

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD)

FASD refers to a group of conditions caused by exposure to alcohol during pregnancy, leading to growth issues, behavioral challenges, and learning disabilities.

Key Facts About FASD

- Caused by alcohol use during pregnancy, with higher risk linked to frequent or binge drinking.
- Can lead to challenges with memory, attention, impulse control, and social skills, varying in severity.
- Diagnosed through facial features, growth patterns, and neurodevelopmental assessments.
- Lifelong condition, but early intervention and support can improve outcomes, though access to resources remains a challenge.

Fragile X Syndrome

Fragile X syndrome is a genetic disorder that causes intellectual disability, particularly in males. Physical features may include a long face, large ears, and hyperactivity, and some individuals also exhibit symptoms of autism.

Key Facts About Fragile X Syndrome

- Caused by a mutation on the X chromosome, impacting brain development, with males typically more affected than females.
- Can lead to speech delays, social anxiety, sensory sensitivities, and motor coordination difficulties.
- Often coexists with autism traits, including challenges in communication and social interactions.
- Early interventions like speech therapy, behavioral therapy, and special education can help develop essential skills.

Intellectual Disability (ID)

Intellectual disability (ID) is a condition characterized by below-average intellectual ability (IQ under 70) and difficulties with daily life skills, such as self-care, socializing, and learning.

Key Facts About Intellectual Disability

- Can occur alone or as part of syndromes like Down syndrome or Fragile X syndrome.
- Causes include genetic factors, prenatal exposures, birth complications, or brain injuries.
- Affects problem-solving, reasoning, and adaptability, with support needs ranging from mild to significant.
- Special education, life skills training, and therapy can help individuals achieve greater independence.

Nonverbal Learning Disorder (NVLD)

NVLD is a proposed neurodevelopmental condition affecting visual-spatial processing, fine motor skills, math reasoning, and social skills, while verbal intelligence remains strong.

Key Facts About NVLD

- Not officially recognized in the DSM-5 but often diagnosed based on patterns of strengths and weaknesses.
- People with NVLD may struggle with body language, organization, and interpreting visual information.
- Symptoms can overlap with autism, ADHD, and bipolar disorder, sometimes leading to misdiagnosis.
- Support strategies include social skills training, executive function coaching, and occupational therapy.

Tourette's Syndrome

Tourette's Syndrome (TS) is a neurodevelopmental disorder that begins in childhood or adolescence and is characterized by involuntary movements (motor tics) and vocal tics.

Tourette's Syndrome was first described in 1885 by Georges Gilles de la Tourette. While its exact cause is unknown, it is believed to result from genetic and neurological factors affecting brain circuits.

Key Facts About Tourette's

- Common tics include blinking, throat clearing, facial movements, and sniffing, which can change over time in intensity and frequency.
- Coprolalia (involuntary swearing) is widely associated with TS but occurs in only a small percentage of individuals.
- Often coexists with ADHD and OCD, which can have a greater impact on daily life than the tics themselves.
- While there is no cure, behavioral therapy is the primary treatment, with medication used only in severe cases.