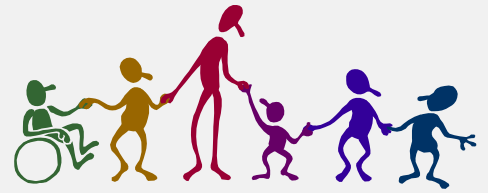


CERTIFIED FAMILY HOME INTRO TO DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES



INTRODUCTION TO DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

Examples

The causes and types of developmental disabilities are varied. Since you will work with many different people, a few examples of developmental disabilities are described below.

As you review the terms, remember that a label does not tell us about a person's skills or capabilities. For example, to best serve a person with cerebral palsy, you need to know the individual well. In a person's record, you may find reports from a physical or occupational therapist or a physician, which describe in detail the specific disability.

But while reports will provide you with important information, it is knowing the person, his or her family and his or her personal history, which will be the greatest source to guide you in providing assistance. It is important to understand the person's goals, hopes, experiences, and capabilities, as well as his or her particular type of disability.

Cerebral Palsy

Cerebral palsy is a general term. Persons with cerebral palsy have difficulty controlling their body motions. They may make weak or uncoordinated movements. This is caused by damage to certain areas of the brain. Damage to different parts of the brain will cause different forms of cerebral palsy.

Persons with cerebral palsy have very different abilities and disabilities, and like all of us, each is a unique individual. Many persons with cerebral palsy have normal or above average intelligence, although sometimes an individual can have other disabilities like blindness, deafness, epilepsy or mental retardation.

Persons with cerebral palsy may make a number of different kinds of movement. Here are some common examples:

- **Spasticity:** Excessive muscle tightening causing heightened resistance to movement.
- **Rigidness:** Stiffness of the body or limbs.
- **Tremors:** Shaky muscles when a coordinated movement like reaching or walking is attempted.
- **Athetosis:** Slow, uncontrolled movements.

These movements are very different. Most people with cerebral palsy have a mixture of these movements.

Spina Bifida

When the spinal cord fails to close, a baby may be born with spina bifida. These individuals may experience a variety of challenges. They may not have a sense of touch or pain in their legs, for example.

They may have paralysis of their bladder or bowels which prevents them from controlling their body functions.

Some people need very little assistance while others require intensive support. Once again, you need to know the capabilities and needs of each person in order to help. Medical technology has enabled individuals with a spinal cord disability to participate in many more and varied environments than ever before. As a result, opportunities to contribute more fully in their communities as workers, family members, neighbors, friends, and citizens have become more available.

Autism

Autism is relatively rare, and occurs more often in males than females. Researchers are uncertain of the cause of autism, but they believe there is a physical basis. Persons with autism have difficulty relating to other people. They avoid or may not pay attention to others. Generally, they have severely impaired language ability.

When a person with autism learns language skills, she/he may not use this language to talk to people in usual ways. For example, Lydia sometimes repeats exactly what other people say to her. This is called echolalia. Sometimes persons with autism learn how to talk to others in more effective ways. Still, since communicating is difficult, it is very important to learn how to understand what the person's patterns of behavior may communicate.

Often, persons with autism become upset with small changes in a room or a routine. Many individuals may spend hours each day rocking back and forth, singing to themselves, moving their hands in front of their eyes or rubbing their own bodies. This self-stimulatory behavior can interfere with learning more useful and productive ways of behaving.

While most persons with autism have some degree of mental retardation, not all do. A few people have unusual and exceptional skills in music, art, movement, memory, and math. Knowing the individual well helps you better facilitate his/her growth by providing more effective support and training.

Mental Retardation

Persons with mental retardation are individuals who have difficulty learning general knowledge as well as adaptive behavior. Adaptive behavior is the way a person adjusts to their environment. When a person has difficulty with adaptive behavior, he/she will also have difficulty meeting expectations for personal independence at his/her age level.

There are a number of terms which are used to label individuals with mental retardation for purposes of information, funding services, and classification of needs. Again, these labels, while they serve a purpose, can also be harmful.

In order to classify levels of functioning, you will see the terms borderline, moderate, severe and profound. Like any label, these words take on negative stereotypes and self-fulfilling prophecies. While it is necessary to understand the usage of these terms by policy-makers, researchers, and others, it is not in the interest of the individual to use them in referring to him or her, and it is not helpful to plan supports and services based on labels.