



IDEA Categories

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is our nation’s special education law. Within IDEA there are disability terms and definitions which guide states on defining disability and determining who is eligible for special education supports. Key elements to the definitions of the federally recognized disability categories are below. Each state determines the specific eligibility criteria. Please refer to your state definitions for more detailed information. It is important to understand that IDEA definitions of disabilities are not the same as medical diagnoses.

IDEA Disability Category	Definition
Autism	A developmental disability affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction.
Deaf-Blindness	The combination of visual and hearing disabilities. Due to the severity of the combination, children cannot be appropriately served by programs exclusively addressing only deafness or blindness.
Deafness	Hearing impairment where a child cannot process linguistic information through hearing.
Developmental delay	A delay in a child, ages 3-9, in one or more of the following areas: physical, cognitive, communicative, social-emotional or adaptive development.
Emotional disturbance	One or more of a variety of conditions that impact academic performance, including unsatisfactory interpersonal relationships, situationally inappropriate behavior, pervasive depression, psychosomatic symptoms, an inability to learn unrelated to other factors or schizophrenia.
Hearing impairment	Permanent or temporary hearing loss that does not fall under the definition of deafness.
Intellectual disability	Intellectual disability refers to intellectual functioning that is significantly below average. Intellectual disability replaces the term “mental retardation” and is also sometimes referred to as “cognitive disability.”
Multiple disabilities	A combination of any categories of disabilities that is severe enough that the student cannot be served through a single category alone. Deaf-blindness is not included in this category.
Orthopedic impairment	A physical impairment that impacts the student’s ability to move and could be caused by disease, congenital anomaly, or other causes.
Other Health Impairment (OHI)	Any other health impairment that reduces a child’s alertness to the educational environment. Includes disorders such as ADHD, diabetes and sickle cell anemia.



IDEA Categories

Specific Learning Disability (SLD)	A general term applying to a disorder of psychological processes. Includes a broad range of manifestations in literacy or mathematical limitations.
Speech or language impairment	A communication disorder that affects spoken language.
Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)	An injury to the brain caused by outside force such as a car accident. A TBI can impact multiple areas of the brain such as language, memory, motor functions and problem-solving.
Visual impairment including blindness	A condition affecting eyesight that has an adverse educational effect. Includes both partial and full blindness.



This resource is in the public domain. Authorization to reproduce it in whole or in part is granted. This resource was funded by the U.S. Department of Education in 2020 under contract number ED-ESE-14-D-0008. The views expressed here are not necessarily those of the Department. Learn more about professional development planning and 21st CCLC learning at <https://y4y.ed.gov>.

