

# MULTIPLE DISABILITIES

## ■ Definition of Multiple Disabilities under IDEA

Multiple disabilities means concomitant impairments (such as mental retardation-blindness or mental retardation-orthopedic impairment), the combination of which causes such severe educational needs that they cannot be accommodated in special education programs solely for one of the impairments. Multiple disabilities does not include deaf-blindness. 34 CFR 300.8(c)(7)

People with severe disabilities are those who traditionally have been labeled as having severe to profound cognitive impairments or intellectual disabilities. Now, there's a growing understanding that disabilities can affect individuals along a scale of minimal or mild to severe. It is possible to have a mild learning disability or a severe one, just as it's possible to have mild or severe autism, without a clear-cut diagnosis of intellectual disability. Multiple disabilities, by its very name, means that an individual usually has more than one significant disability, such as movement difficulties, sensory loss, and/or a behavior or emotional disorder.

## INCIDENCE

In the 2002-2003 school year, the U.S. Department of Education reported 140,209 students with multiple disabilities.

## POSSIBLE SIGNS AND CHARACTERISTICS

People with severe or multiple disabilities may exhibit a wide range of characteristics, depending on the combination and severity of disabilities, and the person's age. There are, however, some traits they may share, including:

- Limited speech or communication
- Difficulty in basic physical mobility
- Tendency to forget skills through disuse
- Trouble generalizing skills from one situation to another
- A need for support in major life activities (e.g., domestic, leisure, community use, vocational)

## IMPLICATIONS

A variety of medical problems may accompany severe disabilities. Examples include seizures, sensory loss, hydrocephalus, and scoliosis. These conditions should be considered when establishing school services. A multidisciplinary team consisting of the student's parents, educational specialists, and medical specialists in the areas in which the individual demonstrates problems should work together to plan and coordinate necessary services.

## IMPACT ON LEARNING

- Ability levels vary widely, from functional academics to basic life skills
- Learning does occur when appropriate supports and materials are provided
- Appropriate educational programming should include self-care and self-advocacy components
- Deficits in motor development can impact independence and access to the environment
- Physical therapy and orthopedic supports may be necessary to ensure independence
- Knowledge of hearing / visual impairment is essential to appropriate program development
- Deficits in the area of communication should be addressed through the use of assistive technology and augmentative communication systems

## TEACHING TIPS/INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Determining an appropriate educational program for a student with multiple disabilities can be a daunting task due to the variety of pervasive supports needed by these students. The planning process should be a multidisciplinary process, including parents, teachers, physical therapists, assistive technology teachers, and any number of additional support staff. Of course, at the center of the planning process should be the student, and the strengths and desires of the student should guide the entire process. Specific steps to success need to be identified, and timelines set for each educational objective. In addition, resources and supports needed for the student to achieve his goals should be defined and addressed.

One area of support that can be particularly effective for all involved is peer tutoring. Peer tutoring has been proven to have positive results for students with multiple disabilities in a number of separate research studies. However, care must be taken that the tutoring is not a one-way relationship, but is reciprocal. The student with multiple disabilities should also be able to provide something to the tutoring process, even if it is a simple social behavior. Some training on both sides will be necessary to make this a fruitful support system.

### **Assistive Technology**

- Motor skills
- Positioning
- Sensory issues
- Communication

### **Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)**

- Sign language
- Augmentative communication systems
- Tangible and tactile symbol systems
- Choice boards
- Object prompts and symbols
- Physical modeling and prompting
- Microswitch technology

Augmentative communication devices all share four key features: symbols, displays, selection, and output.

### **THIS INFORMATION DEVELOPED FROM THE FOLLOWING RESOURCES:**

- **Perkins Scout**  
[www.perkins.org/resources/scout/students-with-multiple-disabilities/](http://www.perkins.org/resources/scout/students-with-multiple-disabilities/)
- **TASH**  
[www.tash.org/](http://www.tash.org/)
- **Education.com**  
[www.education.com/definition/multiple-disabilities/](http://www.education.com/definition/multiple-disabilities/)
- **Project Ideal: Informing & Designing Education for All Learners**  
[www.projectidealonline.org/multipleDisabilities.php](http://www.projectidealonline.org/multipleDisabilities.php)