



# Understanding Intellectual Disability: A Guide for Families

## What is intellectual disability?

Intellectual disability affects individual's capacity to develop cognitive (reasoning) and adaptive skills (daily living skills). An individual can be affected mildly, moderately, severely, or profoundly. Intellectual disability is not a disease in itself—it occurs when a condition impairs the development of the brain and many factors can cause it. The most common are genetic conditions (like Down syndrome, fragile X syndrome), complications during pregnancy and environmental factors, problems at birth or childhood illness.

## How do you receive this diagnosis?

An intellectual disability can be diagnosed based on:

- Cognitive testing, an individual's ability to learn, think, solve problems, and make sense of the world (Intelligence Quotient, called IQ) is below 70—75
- Individual's adaptive functioning (conceptual, social, and practical skills) is low
- The condition is present before age 18

## How do you manage this diagnosis?

While there is no cure for intellectual disability, treatments and services can help a person attain his/her potential. Therapies that can help promote the development, education, interests, and personal well-being may include: speech, physical, occupational, and behavioral therapy. As the person with intellectual disability approaches adulthood, his/her situation will depend on the severity of their disability.

## RESOURCES

### American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

aaidd.org  
(202) 387-1968

### The ARC

thearc.org  
(800) 433-5255

For additional information, you may also contact  
WRC's Staff Psychologist Kaely Shilakes, Psy.D  
who can be reached at (310) 258-4157.



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