



Early Childhood & Developmental Disabilities

Overview

Developmental disabilities are a group of conditions that occur during the developmental period and may impact a person's cognitive, social, academic, physical, and/or adaptive functioning. These disabilities are generally understood to be life-long, although the individual's specific challenges may change as they age. Additionally, many people with developmental disabilities may learn compensatory behaviors so that their symptoms are not as impairing as they once were. For example, a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) may learn social skills and improve their communication abilities over time.³

Developmental disabilities come about for various reasons and can be genetic (e.g., Down syndrome).³ Typically, these disabilities are first apparent in early childhood (e.g., before a child begins Kindergarten). These disabilities may be specific to one area of functioning, or global to multiple areas. For example, a child may have a Specific Learning Disorder (e.g., dyslexia) and their only difficulties are with reading abilities. Conversely, a child may have difficulties in multiple areas and may meet criteria for Global Developmental Delay or Intellectual Disability.^{3, 4}

Challenges

In early childhood, it is important to be aware of developmental milestones and whether children are meeting them.⁴ Pediatricians can help parents and caregivers know when to seek further evaluation when children are not meeting expected milestones.³

Unfortunately, there is a dearth of providers who are qualified to perform these developmental evaluations. This results in long waitlists at the clinics who do provide these evaluations. Long waitlists mean that families and children may not receive the services they need during the early intervention period (e.g., before age 3).²

Furthermore, families in rural communities may have to wait even longer and travel significant distance to receive diagnoses and access to intervention.¹

Promising Practices & Future Directions

Fortunately, in recent years, providers have been adapting their assessment procedures for use via telemedicine. This allows families in rural and underserved communities the ability to access services without the need for travel.¹

Additionally, the federal government provides funding for local school districts to implement "Child Find" practices. These practices are put in place to locate children who need early intervention services and connect them with resources. Children with developmental disabilities are entitled to free or low-cost services and education starting from birth until the age of 21. Thus, local school districts have a responsibility to locate the children who are in need of those services.⁴

Resources

Each state in the US has both a Parent Center and a University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education, Research, and Service

(UCEDD). If you're concerned your child may be exhibiting some developmental delays, you can contact these agencies and they can connect you with the resources in your state.

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References

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