

# ACA Practice Briefs

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## Counseling Youth Who Have Intellectual Disabilities

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### DESCRIPTION OF INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

The American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2013) defines an intellectual disability (ID) as a disorder that begins during early development and is characterized by intellectual and adaptive functioning deficits. These deficits affect individuals' conceptual (i.e., understanding of the world), social, and practical functioning. Youth who have an ID struggle with basic skills that are needed for everyday survival. Deficits might be observed in communication struggles, understanding and obeying laws and rules, correctly identifying the motivations of others, and performing hygiene and self-care tasks such as eating, bathing, and dressing.

A disruption of brain development causes the impairment associated with ID. An ID presents in different ways for youth, but the three criteria include deficits in intellectual functioning, deficits in adaptive functioning, and onset during the developmental period (APA, 2013). Although these deficits are often present at birth, the effects are typically noticed as youth approach school age and are faced with academic and social demands.

Youth who have an ID have trouble with everyday tasks, which can lead to difficulty in the school setting (Kress, Paylo, & Stargell, 2019). Additionally, youth who have an ID often experience impairment in their personal and social functioning. Typically, parents, teachers, and other school personnel notice some indicators of an ID and request formal testing and assessments in order to identify strategies for supporting the youth. For example, parents might notice that their child has not developed speech like other children of a similar age, and the parents might consult with their pediatrician, who might then provide a referral to an early intervention contact person in their community. Or, a teacher might notice that a student has trouble remembering left from right, and the teacher might consult with an educational specialist, who can consult with parents and coordinate assessments and interventions.

Early intervention is available in every state as a result of part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and evaluations and assessments are free of charge under this act. The "Part C Coordinator Contact Information" link found in this document can be used to access contact information for an early intervention coordinator in every state. Alternatively, parents can consult with their pediatricians or the Department of Pediatrics at any local hospital to learn about referrals for developmental concerns.

#### Resources:

Clinical characteristics of intellectual disabilities: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK332877/>

Developmental milestones: <https://www.parentcenterhub.org/milestones/>

Early intervention information: <https://www.parentcenterhub.org/ei-overview/>