

## **Disabilities information**

### **Step “Building the foundation” into the educational approach**

#### **Relevant for various types of disability**

#### **Part 1: Visual disabilities**

##### **Step by step description of the activity**

To understand what visual impairments are, we need to know what abilities our eyes have. And they are amazing organs that can do a lot, for example,

- focus
- move
- see what is in front or to the side
- see clearly
- work together so that we see three-dimensionally
- see colors
- respond to contrast as well as light and dark
- work together with the brain so that we understand what we see

The latter is particularly important, since how people will perceive an object depends not only on what passes before their eyes but also on how the brain interprets what is seen.

We distinguish eight visual conditions, most of which are also associated with various disabilities. In the table below we can familiarize ourselves with them:

normal vision	No problems. clear image, free movement, and details visible even from a distance.	There is no damage Myopia or farsightedness corrected with glasses
tunnel vision	Good central vision, no peripheral (side) vision – need to search to detect the target and to have movement in the environment.	Retinitis pigmentosa Glaucoma
Peripheral vision	Good peripheral (side) vision, but no central vision - need to position the target in the visible area.	Problems with the macula (eg, macular degeneration) Stargard disease
Broken vision (spots/patches)	Disturbed visual field, with missing elements - need to position the target in a clear part of the visual field.	Diabetic retinopathy Optic atrophy
Blurred vision	Blurred image due to rapid eye movements (lateral / up and down / rotating) - need of time to focus.	Nystagmus
Reduced visual acuity due to poor contrast/light	Difficulties in recognizing details and targets at a distance - need more time and more light.	Cataract
Reduced visual acuity due to excessive illumination	Difficulties in recognizing details - may need blinds, curtains, tinted glasses, ability to sit with back to the light source.	Photophobia Albinism

Due to the conditions listed above, visually impaired people may experience difficulties in various situations. Let's take a look at some of them:

1. What could be the difficulties when a visually impaired person is part of a workgroup:

- To know who is part of the group and who is sitting where.
- To understand if someone leaves or joins the group.
- To know when it is his/her turn to join in a conversation or activities.
- Needs more time to become familiar with any visual materials (for example, the maps that are in the image).

2. What could be the difficulties when a visually impaired person has to follow a moving object (in our example watches a football match):

- Tracking a fast-moving object (e.g. a ball).
- Throwing, catching and coordinating a fast-moving object.
- Crossing a road with passing vehicles.
- Depth perception in some types of visual impairment.

3. What could be the difficulties when a visually impaired person is in the classroom:

- To be part of a large group.
  - To know when someone is talking specifically to him/her.
  - Light coming in through the window – curtains/blinds may be needed to limit light.
  - Ability to track activity occurring in the front of the room.
  - Perception of information on the black/white/smart board or projected one.
4. What could be the difficulties when a visually impaired person needs to look at details (in this case, a sheet of music):
- Finding specific information on a piece of paper - will take longer and may need to enlarge the image
  - Confusion of details – e.g. pencil markings and amount of information on the sheet
  - Poor contrast between the printed notes and the color of the paper
  - Focusing on details for more extended periods can be tiring and, in some cases, painful (causing headaches).
5. What could be the difficulties when a visually impaired person is looking at someone (someone's face):
- Friend recognition.
  - Seeing and understanding facial expressions.
  - Seeing and interpreting body language.
6. What could be the difficulties when a visually impaired person must see/check what he wrote (in this case a letter):
- Sticking to a straight line in writing.
  - Ability to write quickly so that there is no lag behind others.
  - Inability to read what is written.
  - Finding the place where something already written needs to be added or corrected.
  - Changing focus from distant (to the board) to near (the paper we are writing on).
  - Concentrating on writing and listening at the same time.

## Part 2: Intellectual disabilities

Intellectual disability involves problems with general mental abilities that affect an individual's functioning in two areas:

- Intellectual (learning, problem solving, judgement).
- Daily life activities such as communication and independent living.

These deficits begin early in the developmental period with intellectual disability affecting about 1% of the population. When diagnosing an intellectual disability, experts take into consideration such domains as “conceptual” – language development, reading and writing, math skills, knowledge, logic and reasoning, “social” – empathy, communication skills, rules following, making and keeping friends, and “practical” – everyday life independence in areas such as personal care, school/job responsibilities, managing money, leisure, etc.

Intellectual disabilities are identified as mild (85% of all people with such disability), moderate or severe.

The hardships, which youth with intellectual disabilities might be facing, can include:

- have trouble speaking
- find it hard to remember things (the lack of short-term memory is a frequent sign cases varying from mild to severe)
- have trouble understanding and abiding by social rules, so sometimes they demonstrate socially unacceptable behavior
- have trouble seeing the results of their actions
- have trouble solving problems

**Several tips when working with youth with intellectual disabilities.**

**Tip 1:** As such young people frequently have difficulties with verbal communication, do not rely on that, but rather look for behaviors and abstain from immediately relating their momentary behavior to their condition. They might be going through some trauma or experiencing a period of exceptional difficulty or distress. There are individuals who, when feeling emotionally unsafe, have the urge to take control of something in their physical environment and relying on them being verbal about it would lead to no success.

**Tip 2:** Be flexible in the communication with youth with intellectual disabilities, allowing them to take the lead as frequently as they see fit, in order to feel a sense of autonomy. By using listening, honoring and validating them helps them to shift out of an eventual state of mute defense and towards progress.

**Tip 3:** Be mindful about the high likelihood of co-occurring mental health issues, such as ADHD, depressive or anxiety disorders. This would require varying the provided support in order to meet the unique needs of the young people we are working with, without sacrificing their autonomy and empowerment in the process.

### **Part 3: Physical (locomotor) disabilities**

Physical disabilities represent substantial and long-term conditions, which affect a part of a person's body in a way, which impairs and limits their physical functioning, mobility, stamina or dexterity. This loss of physical capacity leads to the person having a reduced ability or inability, to perform various body movements as well as controlling their muscles, making independent performing of specific tasks more challenging.

Physical disabilities can be congenital or they can be acquired later in life due to an accident, an injury, an infection, an illness or a medical condition such as a stroke or dementia.

Examples of physical disability include cerebral palsy, Carpal tunnel syndrome, amputations, spinal cord injuries and others.

Physical disabilities are categorised into groups, the main being musculoskeletal disabilities that affect the joints, bones and muscles and include loss or deformity of limbs and/or muscle weakness (among these common examples include back and neck pain, osteoarthritis, fractures associated with bone fragility and inflammatory conditions like rheumatoid arthritis), neuromusculoskeletal disabilities, which represent the inability to move affected body parts due to diseases, degeneration or disorder of the nervous system (among those falling cerebral palsy, spina bifida, stroke, spinal cord injury, head injury and poliomyelitis).

#### **Some tips about how to support youth with physical disabilities**

**Tip:** Do not presume that the person needs help. Always ask before providing such. This tip is valid for all types of disabilities. It is ok to have the help offer be turned down and this should not be taken as disrespectful.

**Tip:** Do not rush people with speech impediments to speak fast and do not try to imagine what they are actually trying to tell you. Give them the extra time they need and be respectful.

**Tip:** Do not sieve your words and communicate naturally with the person with a disability. Talk as you would do that with anyone else, not patronizing or addressing them as if they are of young than their actual age. At the same time, do not use bad language when referring to disabilities such as cripple, handicap and wheelchair-bound.

**Tip:** Check whether it is ok to ask personal questions first. Many people with disabilities would love to share and explain their conditions, but others may be unwilling either generally or due to some period they are going through.

**Tip:** Communicate at eye level – not looking down at the person. Kneel or sit down in order to get to their eye level.

**Tip:** Focus on the person, not their disability as they are not defined by it.

**Tip:** Do not use patronizing gestures like patting the person on the head or shoulder, unless of course you are really close and this is an expression of affection.

**Tip:** Be mindful where you organize events. Make sure the places and spaces are accessible. Make sure that the route is accessible and that there are accessible toilets.

**Tip:** Respect people's choices and independence. We can't possibly know what is best for us.

**Tip:** Do not move or remove someone's assistive equipment or devices without permission.

**Tip:** Do not engage with service dogs at work. Do not pat them without asking.

## **Go to the videos for the material.**

Video interview on intellectual disabilities

Video interview on physical disabilities

Video interview on visual disabilities

Visual awareness video

Video interview on hearing impairments

## **Links to other resources**

A very good list with descriptions of different conditions, leading to visual impairments:

<https://www.disabled-world.com/disability/types/vision/>

A platform for learning about intellectual disabilities: <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/intellectual-disability/what-is-intellectual-disability>

Facts about intellectual disabilities: <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/developmentaldisabilities/facts-about-intellectual-disability.html>

Tips for working with traumatized people with intellectual disabilities:

<https://centerforadolescentstudies.com/3-tips-for-working-with-youth-with-intellectual-and-developmental-disabilities-and-trauma/>

Site for discovering what types of physical disabilities exist: <https://www.carehome.co.uk/advice/types-of-physical-disabilities>

Tips for supporting people with intellectual disabilities:

<https://www.independenceaustralia.com.au/health-articles/a-z/>