## Intellectual disability

Intellectual disability (ID) is the diagnosis given to people with a low IQ score – usually 70 or below, although the DSM-5 also requires a person to have conceptual, social and other daily life area impairments (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2015).

| Severity Category | Approximate Percent Distribution of Cases by Severity | DSM-IV Criteria (severity levels were based only on IQ categories) | DSM-5 Criteria (severity classified on the basis of daily skills) | AAIDD Criteria (severity classified on the basis of intensity of support needed) | SSI Listings Criteria (The SSI listings do not specify severity levels, but indicate different standards for meeting or equalling listing level severity.) |
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| Mild | 85% | Approximate IQ range 50-69 | Can live independently with minimum levels of support. | Intermittent support needed during transitions or periods of uncertainty. | IQ of 60 through 70 and a physical or other mental impairment imposing an additional and significant limitation of function |
| Moderate | 10% | Approximate IQ range 36-49 | Independent living may be achieved with moderate levels of support, such as those available in group homes. | Limited support needed in daily situations. | A valid verbal, performance or full scale IQ of 59 or less |
| Severe | 3.5% | Approximate IQ range 20-35 | Requires daily assistances with self-care activities and safety supervision. | Extensive support needed for daily activities. | A valid verbal, performance, or full-scale IQ of 59 or less |
| Profound | 1.5% | IQ <20 | Requires 24-hour care. | Pervasive support needed for every aspect of daily routines. | A valid verbal, performance, or full-scale IQ of 59 or less |

*Figure 38. Classification of intellectual disability severity.*
*Source: National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2015).*

Intellectual disability was once called 'mental retardation', however this term is now considered inappropriate. Most people with intellectual disability also suffer from 1 or more additional disorders or disabilities (such as autism, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder or ADHD). The main challenge with ID is the person's reduced capacity to learn. This includes reduced cognitive (thinking), reasoning, problem-solving, short and long-term planning, memory and risk-evaluation skills. People who have intellectual disability struggle to link what they already know with what they are trying to learn and they take longer to learn basic skills. In a school setting, these students have difficulties with

academic tasks such as learning to read and write. Their progress is much slower than their neurotypical peers and they can have trouble staying on task.

Issues with learning are not just academic. They also manifest as behavioural and social problems. For example, people with intellectual disability may not know what to do or say in certain social situations. As a consequence, a person who has ID may seem immature for his or her age and physical appearance. He/she may have an underdeveloped set of social skills. This can be amplified if the person suffers from another disorder such as autism (given its association with social, behavioural, communication and sensory problems). People with ID often lack the skills to interpret body language and facial expressions. They may not know when a person is angry with them. They may also lack the executive function skills to regulate basic instinctual behaviours such as food intake.

**Hint**

Statistically speaking, an IQ of 70 is 2 standard deviations below the average population IQ of 100. This is one reason for why the cut-off is 70 – only a small percentage of the population have an IQ of 70 or lower (less than 5%).

Some of the ways you can support students with intellectual disability are listed below:

- Consistently use all of the instructional and behaviour management strategies found in earlier chapters (such as the 3Ps).
- Remember the basic principles of behaviour management (e.g., treating the root cause of the behaviour and considering the antecedent behaviour to identify the triggers).
- Use the strategies in this chapter (such as visuals and social stories).
- Work with parents. They may know strategies that work for their child.
- Remove distractions such as background noises and people walking past (e.g., don’t sit a student with ID next to a window that is next to a busy path).

- Allow extra time for the person to process your instructions, be ready to repeat them, keep them simple and provide them in multiple formats (i.e., written verbal and visual). Don't give instructions unless you have the student's full attention.
- Allow additional time for the student to practise new skills and find exciting ways for him/her to practise a single skill repeatedly (e.g., use art and craft activities to practise writing new spelling words).
- Use natural supports (e.g., peer learning) on a regular basis. This means resisting the temptation to hover (a mistake that many TAs make) and allowing the student to work independently as well as with friends. This encourages the student to develop skills such as asking for help and making small talk.
- When the teacher organises a whole-of-class activity, organise several students to work in a small group with the student who has ID. This reduces the student's stress and anxiety.
- Build the student's confidence with lots of praise, recognise milestones, speak with his/her parents regularly, hang work done around the room, and encourage peers to praise his or her work and behaviour.
- As with all students, have a solid routine (including short blocks of time for social stories, relaxation time, social or play time, and other routines such as 10- minute phonics activities).
- Keep all activities short and sharp. For example, 4 minutes to practise reading, 6 minutes for free writing, etc. Lessons and activities should be fast-paced and have momentum. Your job as a TA is to make this happen by adapting the curriculum set by the teacher (e.g. chunk down a worksheet into separate sections so the student thinks he or she is doing a series of engaging activities as opposed to a never-ending worksheet).
- Use a strength-based approach. This means capitalising on what the student is good at and his/her interests. If it's dinosaurs – make activities for maths, science and reading all about dinosaurs. This will reduce behavioural issues and speed up the learning process because the student will be more engaged. You can gradually phase out the use of dinosaurs thereafter.