Access
EDUCATIONAL ADVOCACY

GUIDE

THE FIRST STEP TO UNDERSTANDING YOUR CHILD'S PATH

Understanding the 13 IDEA eligibility categories

Federal law (IDEA) defines 13 disability categories, and a child must qualify under one of them to receive special education services. A diagnosis alone isn't enough: the disability must also impact your child's education. States can rename or adjust these categories, so check your state's rules.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

A developmental disability that affects how a child communicates, interacts socially, and behaves. Signs may include difficulty with verbal and nonverbal communication, challenges with social relationships, and repetitive behaviors or restricted interests.

Deaf-Blindness

The combination of both hearing and vision loss. This category is separate because the combination of these two impairments creates unique communication and educational needs that cannot be fully addressed by programs designed for children with only one of these disabilities.

Deafness

A hearing loss so severe that a child cannot process spoken language through hearing, with or without amplification.

Hearing Impairment

A permanent or fluctuating hearing loss that adversely affects educational performance but does not meet the definition of deafness. Schools often address it together with deafness.

Emotional Disturbance (ED)

This category covers children who demonstrate one or more of the following over a long period of time and to a marked degree: difficulty learning that can't be explained by other factors, difficulty maintaining relationships with peers or teachers, inappropriate behaviors or feelings, a general mood of unhappiness or depression, or physical symptoms or fears related to school or personal problems.

Note: This category is not for children who simply have a hard time following rules or getting along with others. There must be a deeper emotional component. Virginia calls this category emotional disability.

Developmental Delay (a state option)

Not one of the 13 federal categories. States may use it for young children (federal limit: ages 3 through 9). Virginia uses ages 2 through 6; Illinois, 3 through 9. It covers significant delays in physical, communication, cognitive, social-emotional, or adaptive development, so a young child can get services without a more specific diagnosis.

Intellectual Disability (ID)

Characterized by significantly below-average general intellectual functioning alongside deficits in adaptive behavior (everyday skills like communication, self-care, and social skills). This must be identified during the developmental period and adversely affect educational performance.

Multiple Disabilities

When a child has two or more disabilities that occur together (such as intellectual disability combined with orthopedic impairment) and the combination creates educational needs that cannot be served by a program designed for just one disability. Deaf-blindness is excluded from this category.

Orthopedic Impairment

A severe physical impairment that adversely affects educational performance. This includes impairments caused by congenital conditions (such as clubfoot or absence of a limb), disease (such as poliomyelitis or bone tuberculosis), or other causes (such as cerebral palsy, amputations, or fractures that result in contractures).

Other Health Impairment (OHI)

This category applies when a child has limited strength, vitality, or alertness (including heightened alertness to environmental stimuli) due to a chronic or acute health condition that adversely affects educational performance. Common conditions classified under OHI include ADHD, epilepsy, asthma, diabetes, sickle cell anemia, and Tourette syndrome, among others.

Specific Learning Disability (SLD)

A disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using language (spoken or written) that affects a child's ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do math. Examples include dyslexia, dyscalculia, and dysgraphia. SLD does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, intellectual disability, emotional disturbance, or environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.

Speech or Language Impairment (SLI)

A communication disorder that adversely affects educational performance. This includes stuttering, impaired articulation (difficulty producing speech sounds correctly), language impairment (difficulty understanding or using words, sentences, or concepts), or a voice disorder.

ABOUT EXCLUSIONS

Specific learning disability has the longest list of what it is not. If reading trouble traces back to vision, hearing, a motor or intellectual disability, emotional disturbance, or environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage, the team will look at a different category. This isn't a way to deny services; it asks the team to name the real cause so the plan matches the need. If it's unclear, ask which category the team is considering and what evidence supports it.

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)

An acquired injury to the brain caused by an external physical force, resulting in total or partial functional disability or psychosocial impairment. TBI may affect cognition, language, memory, attention, reasoning, abstract thinking, problem-solving, sensory and perceptual abilities, and behavior. This category does not apply to brain injuries that are congenital or degenerative.

Visual Impairment (including blindness)

An impairment in vision that, even with correction, adversely affects a child's educational performance. This includes both partial sight and blindness. Children in this category typically receive instruction in Braille, orientation and mobility, and other specialized skills.

DID YOU KNOW?

About two-thirds of students served under IDEA qualify under just three categories: Specific Learning Disability (32%), Speech or Language Impairment (19%), and Other Health Impairment (15%, which includes ADHD).

Source: NCES, Condition of Education 2024 (2022-23 data)

A DIAGNOSIS IS NOT ELIGIBILITY

A medical diagnosis does not automatically mean the disability has an adverse effect on your child's education. Eligibility takes two things: a disability that fits one of these categories, and a need for special education and related services because of it.

A few important reminders

Being evaluated does not guarantee eligibility. Parents or legal guardians have the right to request an evaluation in writing, participate in all eligibility meetings, and disagree with the school's findings.

A child can qualify under more than one eligibility category. Schools often use the terms primary, secondary, or tertiary disability to indicate which category has the greatest impact on the child's education. All identified areas should be reflected in the IEP and addressed through services.

Want to understand your child's eligibility category and what it really means for their education? We can help you make sense of it.

Book a free 15-minute consultation at MyAccessAdvocacy.com

Karlie Libraro, M.S., CCC-SLP EDUCATIONAL ADVOCATE | ACCESS EDUCATIONAL ADVOCACY