



Developmental, Cognitive, and Intellectual Disabilities: What You Need to Know Library Accessibility Tip Sheet 1

Overview

Developmental disability refers to a group of disabilities that begin in childhood and continue through adulthood. They often have intellectual manifestations but not always. For example, people with cerebral palsy, spinal bifida, and hydrocephalus are all considered to have a developmental disability, but they may or may not have a cognitive disability. In general, people with an intellectual disability, such as Down syndrome, fragile X syndrome, or mental retardation, learn more slowly than their peers. This can affect communicative ability, reasoning, and social skills. People with intellectual and cognitive disabilities may require more time to perform tasks and process information. Most people with these types of disabilities do not have any distinguishable physical characteristics. People with intellectual and cognitive disabilities may live independently. Patrons with developmental disabilities have many of the same recreational and informational needs as do all patrons. People with these types of disabilities attend mainstream colleges, work in rewarding jobs, testify in court, marry, have children, and enjoy sports and reading, among other things.

Tips

- Develop programs that have universal appeal.
- Do not underestimate people with developmental disabilities.
- Use universal or easily recognizable graphic representation on signage.
- Maintain a barrier-free facility, with easily manipulated door handles and doors, restroom fixtures, and water fountains.
- Talk directly to the patron, rather than a caregiver.
- Listen and be patient.
- Give concrete directions.
- Demonstrate as well as tell.
- Provide appropriate materials immediately. Provide opportunities to try things rather than simply explaining a given task.
- Do not combine excessive instructions into a wordy command. Break instructions into steps, and relay steps individually.
- Provide positive reinforcement to employees, and answer questions quickly.
- Involve patrons in clubs or group activities that are age/interest appropriate.

Materials

- Hi-lo books, including new adult reader material.
- Books written for children are generally not appropriate for teens and adults.

- Book and audio sets.
- Audio books.
- Magazines.

Assistive Technology

- Software programs, such as vocabulary- and communication-building skills, for example, those designed by Laureate Learning: <http://www.laureatelearning.net/professionals602/products/prodsby/category.html> and Attainment Company <http://www.attainmentcompany.com/>
- Touch screens enable the user to respond by simply touching the screen.
- Screen readers.
- A variety of input devices such as Intellikeys, an alternative keyboard that is easy to see, touch, and understand, or the Jelly Bean switch, a large, durable, single switch that activates regardless of where the user presses and provides audible feedback.
- Voice input and output devices.

Resources

The Arc

www.thearc.org

An information, advocacy, and service-provision organization with chapters in most states.

National Association of Council on Developmental Disabilities

www.nacdd.org

Focusing on public policy, this organization advocates for individuals with developmental disabilities.

National Down Syndrome Society

www.ndss.org

Basic information about Down syndrome.

This tip sheet, revised in 2010, is one in a series developed by the Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies, a division of the American Library Association. See <http://www.ala.org/ascla>.