**What is an Intellectual Disability?**

**Problems Learning and Functioning**

If a kid has an intellectual disability, it means that he or she learns and develops more slowly than other kids. At one time, intellectual disabilities were called "mental retardation," but that term is not used as much anymore because it hurts people's feelings.

Someone who has an intellectual disability will have trouble learning and functioning in everyday life. This person could be 10 years old, but might not talk or write as well as a typical 10-year-old. He or she also is usually slower to learn other skills, like how to get dressed or how to act around other people.

But having an intellectual disability doesn't mean a person can't learn. Ask anyone who knows and loves a person with an intellectual disability! Some kids with autism, Down syndrome, or cerebral palsy may be described as having an intellectual disability, yet they often have a great capacity to learn and become quite capable kids.

Just like other health problems, an intellectual disability can be mild (smaller) or major (bigger). The bigger the disability, the more trouble someone will have learning and becoming an independent person.

**What Causes Intellectual Disabilities?**

Intellectual disabilities happen because the brain gets injured or a problem prevents the brain from developing normally. These problems can happen while the baby is growing inside his or her mom, during the baby's birth, or after the baby is born. Many times, though, doctors don't know the cause.

Here are some problems that can cause intellectual disabilities:

There's a problem with the baby's genes, which are in every cell and determine how the body will develop. (Genes are inherited from both parents, so a baby might receive genes that are abnormal or the genes might change while the baby is developing.)

There's a problem during the pregnancy. Sometimes, the mom might get an illness or infection that can harm the baby. Taking certain medicines while pregnant can cause problems for the baby. Drinking alcohol or taking illegal drugs also can damage a baby's developing brain.

During childbirth, the baby doesn't get enough oxygen.

The baby is born way too early.

After being born, the baby gets a serious brain infection.

A serious head injury can hurt the brain and cause intellectual disabilities at any point during life. Some of these disabilities are temporary and others can be permanent. (That's why it's important to wear your bike helmet and always wear a seatbelt in the car!)

Doctors figure out that someone has an intellectual disability by testing how well the person thinks and solves problems. If a problem is spotted, doctors and other professionals can work with the family to decide what type of help is needed.

**What's Happens at School?**

During school, a kid with an intellectual disability will probably need help. Some kids have helpers that stay with them during the school day. They may be in special classes or get other services to help them learn and develop.

Someone with an intellectual disability often gets help in learning "life skills." Life skills are the skills people need to take care of themselves as they get older, such as how to cook a meal or ride a public bus to get to work. Adults with intellectual disabilities often have jobs and learn to live independently or in a group home.

Kids with intellectual disabilities want to develop their skills to the best of their abilities. They want to go to school, play, and feel support from loving families and good friends.

What can you do? If you know someone who has an intellectual disability, be a friend. How? Sometimes, it might mean telling a teacher if you see this person being teased or bullied. Other times, it can be as simple as saying something kind, like "Hey, I like your hat!"

If you can't think of anything, just say, "hi." It's a little word that could make that person's day.

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