



What are Intellectual Disabilities?

According to the definition by the American Association of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD), an individual is considered to have an intellectual disability (mental retardation*) based on the following three criteria:

1. Intellectual functioning level (IQ) is below 70-75;
2. Significant limitations exist in two or more adaptive skill areas; and
3. The condition manifests itself before the age of 18.

Adaptive skill areas are those daily living skills needed to live, work and play in the community. The definition includes 10 adaptive skills: communication, self-care, home living, social skills, leisure, health and safety, self-direction, functional academics, community use and work.

Adaptive skills are assessed in the person's typical environment across all aspects of an individual's life. A person with limits in intellectual functioning who does not have limits in adaptive skill areas may not be diagnosed as having an intellectual disability.

Children with an intellectual disability grow into adults with an intellectual disability; they do not remain "eternal children."

A person is eligible to participate in Special Olympics if they have been identified by an agency of professional as having intellectual disabilities as determined by their localities. The minimum age requirement for participation in Special Olympics competition is eight years of age. Special Olympics also recently launched the Young Athletes™ Program, an innovative sports play program for children with intellectual disabilities between the ages of 2-7, which engages young athletes through developmentally appropriate play activities designed to foster physical, cognitive, and social development while also introducing them to the world of sports prior to Special Olympics eligibility at age eight.

How prevalent are intellectual disabilities?

The following statistics and information on intellectual disabilities have been adapted from information from the Population Reference Bureau, The Arc (formerly the Association for Retarded Citizens), the World Health Organization and various associations for people with disabilities.

According to the World Health Organization, up to three percent or almost 200 million people of the world's population have intellectual disabilities – this is the largest disability population in the world.

Intellectual Disabilities knows no boundaries. It cuts across the lines of racial, ethnic, educational, social and economic backgrounds, and it can occur in any family.

Terminology

Special Olympics prefers to focus on people and their gifts and accomplishments, and to dispel negative attitudes and stereotypes. As language has evolved, Special Olympics has updated its official terminology to use standard terminology that is more acceptable to our athletes. We use "people-first language." Two examples: (1) refer to individuals, persons or people with intellectual disabilities, rather than "intellectually disabled people" or "the intellectually disabled" and (2) people have intellectual disabilities, rather than are "suffering from," "afflicted with" or "a victim of" intellectual disabilities.

A language guide is available on our Web site.

*Special Olympics replaced the term mental retardation with intellectual disabilities in 2004 to reflect the ongoing industry-wide change of the term.