

Q. What are severe and profound general learning disabilities?

A. The World Health Organisation classifies general learning disabilities into mild, moderate, severe and profound. The definitions of the degrees of disability are usually expressed in terms of IQ, behavioural competence and/or the need for special services. The IQ range for severe learning disability ranges between 20-35 and for profound learning disability, it is below 20.

Students with severe to profound disabilities may also have additional or multiple disabilities, such as physical impairment, hearing impairment, visual impairment, cerebral palsy, autistic tendencies, emotional disturbance, sensory losses or behaviour problems.

Q. What are some characteristics of severe and profound general learning disabilities?

A. Individuals with severe and profound disabilities may exhibit a wide range of characteristics, depending on the combination and severity of disabilities and the person's age. These may include:

- Significant delay in reaching developmental milestones
- Serious speech or communication problems
- A severe degree of apathy in relation to the environment
- Difficulty in basic physical mobility
- Inability to remember basic skills
- Inability to generalise skills from one situation to another
- Dependence on others to satisfy basic needs, e.g., feeding, toileting
- Inability to live without support throughout life

A variety of medical conditions may accompany severe or profound disabilities, such as epilepsy, hydrocephalus and scoliosis.

Q. What can be done to help someone with severe and profound general learning disabilities?

A. Individuals with severe and profound general learning disabilities are unlikely to have a keen awareness and understanding of themselves, the people around them or

their environment. Their senses may not allow them to interpret what is happening around them and they may not have control of movement and speech and so are unable to communicate. They generally require stimulation of their basic sensory, perceptual and cognitive abilities. Language development, social skills development, functional skills development (i.e., self-help skills) and leisure skills should be part of an individualised and structured educational programme implemented by a multi-disciplinary team comprising teachers, care workers, therapists and nurses.

Classroom organisation should take into consideration the student's need for medications, special diets or special equipment. Assistive technology, such as computers and augmentative/alternative communication devices, may provide valuable instructional assistance for the student.

It is important for parents to receive support from as many sources as possible. They should be aware of what they may be entitled to in terms of grants, respite care and home help. Advice can be obtained from their caseworker or regional health authority. As the student may be receiving services from a multi-disciplinary team, it is important that all members of the team, as well as the student's parents, work together to plan and co-ordinate the necessary services. The teacher will be a valuable source of help and support to parents, as they will be the person who most closely identifies with the needs of the student. Two-way communication between the home and school is vital to ensure the best possible programme is defined for the student.

Related Links

[National Association for the Mentally Handicapped of Ireland \(NAMHI\)](#)

[Mencap](#) (UK)

[The ARC](#) (US)

[Down's Syndrome Association](#) (UK)

[Down Syndrome Information Network](#) (US)