



# Intellectual Disability

## About intellectual disability

Children with intellectual disability may have challenges with thinking skills, such as reasoning, problem solving, planning, and judgement (e.g. understanding and predicting risks). They can also have difficulties with academic and everyday skills (e.g. reading, telling the time, doing maths, and handling money). They find it harder to learn, which means they need extra time and help to learn new skills.

Children with intellectual disability also frequently experience communication and social challenges. They may seem socially immature for their age, and they may find it difficult to understand body language (e.g. facial expression, gestures). They may find instructions with several steps hard to follow. They can find it challenging to manage their emotions and behaviour. They may tire easily and find some motor skills difficult. Some may also be restless, over-active, or easily distracted and need support with organisation.

## Strengths

### What might be some strengths?

- Many children with intellectual disability enjoy play, and learning through play.
- Children may show lots of interest in activities that involve play.
- They may have good fine and gross motor skill development through play.

### Where you might provide support?

- They might need more time to think and understand. They might not understand instructions if they are given a lot of information at once.
- They may take longer to learn new skills. Structure and routine may help them.
- They can be very social and friendly, and like talking and spending time with other people. However, sometimes, they might stand too close or be overfamiliar with people.



## Evidence-based strategies

### Consider adjustments to communication style

- **Get student's attention before communicating.** When giving instructions or talking with students check that you have their full attention before beginning. This can be done out loud or with a gesture.
- **Be clear and specific.** It can be helpful to give clear and specific instructions about the task or behavior expected, and how much time they have to work in.
- **Use visual instructions.** Visual instructions about a task or behavior may help support some students. Consider demonstrating the task/behaviour, or asking another student to demonstrate. You could also use a visual schedule, poster or video to outline or model the task
- **Some students may find it easier if they can use gestures.** Some may need to point to the correct answer instead of talking.
- **Give brief prompts immediately before each activity.** It can be helpful to remind students what you want them to focus on in that activity.
- **Give encouragement and correction.** Consider giving positive feedback and correction immediately when children are learning a task or behaviour. This can be reduced gradually as they build their capability.
- **Consider using least-to-most prompts.** If a student isn't sure of a response/task, prompts that gradually increase in the level of support and/or are provided at set intervals (e.g. after 5 seconds) can be helpful. For example, 'least support' prompts may be a broad open-ended question "which number comes next" whereas 'most support' prompts may be "point to the 6 - the 6 comes next".

### Consider adjustments to activities and rules

- **Some tasks may need to be tailored to better engage a student.** Tailor tasks for the student's current level of understanding so they can achieve success.
- **Include child interests.** For example, if a student is motivated by cars, offer a small bundle of toy cars for addition and subtraction. When the student completes their maths, encourage them with some time to play with the cars.
- **Have a consistent routine.** Routines help a student understand how to behave. Students often feel more secure when they know what to expect. Refer AllPlay Learn's class schedule under relevant resources below.



- **Use a token system.** Consider giving tokens for correctly performed actions or behaviours. These tokens can be traded for something of interest to the child. Consider teaching the whole class how to self-monitor (recognise and record their individual completion of a specific behaviour/skill). Access AllPlay Learn's self-monitoring form under relevant resources below.

### Provide lots of opportunities to practise

- **Students may need to practise a task or behaviour many times.** Lots of time to practise in different settings and with different materials can help students learn to use that skill in other situations.
- **Offer fewer tasks with more opportunities to practise.** Offering fewer tasks with more time for students to learn and practise these tasks may be more helpful than offering many tasks with little opportunity to practise.

### Provide opportunities to work with their classmates

- **Provide lots of opportunities for students to work together.** Children with and without intellectual disability can get to know each other and build friendships when they work together. It also helps students learn through watching others.
- **Allocate specific tasks within the group.** Consider assigning tasks if a student with an intellectual disability uses tailored materials or instructions. You could also choose a group member to act as a tutor or mentor.

## Best practice tips

### Provide a supportive environment.

- Children might lack confidence and may worry that they will not be able to keep up with other students. Praise efforts and encourage participation.

### Reduce background noise when giving instructions.

- Avoid background noise and distractions while giving instructions to help all children hear and focus on you. You might need to face the students away from distractions behind you.



### **Simplify instructions and limit the information given at once.**

- Some children might need simple instructions which may need to be repeated lots of times. Use simple words and repeat. Learning a skill might require teachers to break it down into smaller parts at first.

### **Ask parents.**

- Talk to parents to find out the best way to communicate and work with their child. Parents can help you understand a student's unique strengths and areas they need more support.

## **Curriculum considerations**

### **The Arts**

- Drama and music classes let children participate with others in an environment that isn't as dependent on academic skills. Consider providing lots of small group activities. Choosing who will be in each group or pair prevents a child with an intellectual disability from being left out or picked last.

### **English**

- Children with an intellectual disability may need support with literacy skills. They may need one-to-one help using mnemonics (memory strategies) and flash cards, additional time to learn decoding/phonics, and lots of time to practise.

### **Health and Physical Education**

- A child with an intellectual disability may need simple instructions, demonstrations and prompts when learning new skills in physical education classes. The demonstrations and prompts may need to be repeated lots of times. New skills may need to be broken down into smaller parts.
- Some students may need physical help with learning new tasks.
- Consider lots of pair or small group activities. Choosing who will be in each group prevents a child with an intellectual disability from being left out or picked last.



## The Humanities

- Children with an intellectual disability may benefit from support including one-to-one help, and instructions or information repeated lots of times.

## Languages

- Children with an intellectual disability may need support with learning a new language.
- Assess whether learning a language will be of advantage to them on a case-by-case basis.
- If they learn a language, focus on areas of strength and build from there.
- They may need one-to-one help and instructions or information to be repeated lots of times.

## Mathematics

- Children with an intellectual disability may may need support with numeracy. Immediate encouragement and correction and lots of time to practise may help.
- Consider using simple words in maths problems. For example, different ways to describe the same object may be challenging (i.e. He took away three carrots, how many vegetables does he now have?).
- Some children with an intellectual disability will learn well through sensory learning. This might include pointing to touch points on a written number (dots/lines that they can count embedded into a number) or looking at a picture that shows the maths problem.
- Clear and exact instructions in strategies or methods for solving problems may be helpful. Children may need to be taught how to use those strategies across different problems.
- Consider pairing a child with another student who can demonstrate maths skills and give instructions or help. See AllPlay Learn's [Peer Mediation and Group Work](#) for important tips for pairing children.

## Science

- Children with an intellectual disability may benefit from one-to-one help, and instructions or information repeated lots of times.

## Technologies

- Children with an intellectual disability may benefit from one-to-one help, and instructions or information repeated lots of times.



## Other considerations

### First aid

- A child with an intellectual disability may have difficulty communicating that they are in pain or unwell. Watch for signs of pain such as grimacing. Encourage gestures or other methods of communication to work out what may be happening.

### Friendships

- Read more about how [peer mediation and group work](#) can support peers with learning social and communication skills that facilitate the inclusion of children with disabilities.

### Safety drills

- Some children with an intellectual disability may not know how to tell an adult if there is an emergency, or what to do in an emergency or emergency drill. Consider making time for demonstrating and practicing what to do.

### Behaviour

- Some children may not complete their work or they may engage in disruptive behaviour (e.g. call out during class). Giving children choices in their work may make them more motivated and less likely to be distracted. Showing them positive behaviour and giving them clear instructions so that they know what is expected may also help.
- Picture cards or stories about social situations can teach children about positive behaviour.
- Many children can be taught how to self-monitor their behaviour. Consider asking them to record whether they have done what they were asked to do.
- Refer to the [ABC approach](#) for more information on how to reduce challenging behaviour by supporting the child and promoting more helpful behaviour, and our [emotions page](#) for more information about supporting a child with managing their emotions.

### Toileting

- Some children with an intellectual disability may need extra help with toileting. Discuss with parents what help their child may need.



## Homework

- Consider student strengths and challenges. Some children may find completing homework without help difficult. Work out what a child is able to do without help when assigning homework. Alternatively, consider not giving homework to the class to give the child some time away from books.

## School camps

- Some children with an intellectual disability may need extra help on camps. Discuss with parents what help their child may need.

## Transitions

- A child with an intellectual disability may benefit from supports when moving across education settings.
- It may be helpful to teach and practice organisation and homework skills, and time- and self-management skills.
- For more information about supporting students with disabilities when transitioning to a primary or secondary school setting access AllPlay Learn's [transition page](#).
- For children transitioning to primary school access AllPlay Learn's Story A school day, and for children transitioning to secondary school access Access AllPlay Learn's story How to be Organised

## Other co-occurring conditions

- Some children with an Intellectual disability may also be diagnosed with [autism](#), [anxiety](#), [cerebral palsy](#), [Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder \(ADHD\)](#) or [oppositional defiant disorder](#).



## Relevant resources

Visit our [resources page](#) for a range of resources that can help to create inclusive education environments for children with disabilities and developmental challenges. AllPlay Learn's [stories](#) can help children with intellectual disability become familiar with primary school and some of the skills they need to participate in these settings. Other relevant resources for children with intellectual disability are:

- Strengths and abilities communication checklist
- Class schedule
- Student self-monitoring form
- Stay play talk poster (simple)
- Stay play talk poster
- Peer mediation steps poster
- Peer mediation communication prompts poster (for older children)
- Emotion cards (A4)