Intellectual Disability

About intellectual disability

Teenagers 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. They may find it difficult to concentrate.

Teenagers with intellectual disability often 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. A number of teenagers may also struggle with emotions and behaviour. They may be anxious, sad, or irritable. They may have be restless, over-active, or easily distracted and need support with organisation.

Strengths

What might be some strengths?

- Teenagers with an intellectual disability may find is easier to remember visual information, such as written letters or numbers, and pictures. This may mean that work presented visually may help some teenagers learn.
- Similarly, teenagers with an intellectual disability may be able to recognise words, letters and numbers and name them aloud. This may mean that some teenagers with an intellectual disability are able to read words that rely more on recognition than on 'sounding out'.

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 make sure 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 behaviour expected, and how much time they have to work in.
- **Use visual instructions.** Visual instructions about a task or behaviour 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 students may need to point to the correct answer instead of talking.

Consider adjustments to activities and rules

- **Tailor tasks to engage students.** Tailor tasks for the student's current level of understanding so they can achieve success and build from there.
- **Give students lots of time to practise.** Offer fewer tasks with more time to practise instead of many tasks with little time to practise.
- **Have a consistent routine.** Routines help a student understand how to behave. Students often feel more secure when they know what to expect.

Work collaboratively

- **Provide plenty of opportunities for students to work together.** Students with and without an intellectual disability can get to know each other and build friendships through working together. This also helps students learn through watching others.
- **Allocate specific tasks within the group.** Consider assigning tasks so that a student with an intellectual disability can use tailored materials or instructions if needed.

Best practice tips

Provide a supportive environment

- Students 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 students hear and focus on you. You might need to face the students away from distractions behind you.

Simplify instructions

- Some students 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 help. You could ask parents to complete AllPlay Learn's strengths and abilities communication checklist under relevant resources below to find out more information about their child.

Curriculum considerations

The Arts

- Drama and music classes let students 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 prevents a student with an intellectual disability from being left out or picked last.

English

- Teenagers with an intellectual disability may find literacy skills challenging. They may need one-to-one help using mnemonics (memory strategies) and flash cards, as well as lots of time to practise.

- Students with an intellectual disability can think about books (tailored for their reading level) on a deeper level with help from a teacher. Ask students questions about the book to get them thinking. Teach them to summarise the story or guess what might happen next.

Health and Physical Education

- Students with an intellectual disability may need simple instructions, demonstrations and prompts to learn new skills in physical education classes. Demonstrations and prompts may need to be repeated lots of times.
- Skills may need to be broken down into smaller steps.
- Some students may need physical help with learning new tasks
- Consider using pair or small group activities. Choosing who will be in each group prevents students with intellectual disability from being left out or picked last.
- Some students may find changing in and out of their sports uniform at school difficult. Consider letting a student with an intellectual disability come to school in their sports uniform or give them extra time for changing.

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

Students with an intellectual disability may find learning a new language difficult.

- 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

- Students with an intellectual disability may experience delays with numeracy.
- Immediate positive feedback and correction can help, as can lots of time to practise.
- Consider using time delay programs or approaches. These are questions or problems that have a set amount of time for the student to answer. When the time is up, the correct answer is given.

- Consider providing clear and exact instructions in different strategies or methods for solving problems.
- Consider pairing a student with an intellectual disability with another student who can demonstrate maths skills and give instructions or help.

Science

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

Technologies

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

Other considerations

First aid

- A student 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.

Safety drills

- Some students 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 practising what to do.

Behaviour

- Some students may not complete their work or they may engage in disruptive behaviour (e.g. call out during class). Giving students 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 can also help.

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- Picture cards or stories about social situations can teach students about positive behaviour.

- Many students can be taught how to self-monitor their behaviour. Consider asking them to record whether they have done what they are asked to do. AllPlay Learn's self-monitoring form can be found here.

- Refer to the ABC approach for more information on how to reduce challenging behaviour by supporting the young person and promoting more helpful behaviour, and our emotions page for more information about supporting a young person with managing their emotions.

Homework

- Consider student strengths and challenges. Some student may find working on school work at home without help difficult. Work out what a student is able to do without help when assigning homework. Alternatively, consider not giving homework to the class when possible to give the student some time away from books.

Planning and organisation

- Some students with an intellectual disability may find being organized for class challenging.

- Consider providing support with planning and organisation.

- See AllPlay Learn's story how to be organised.

School excursions or camps

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

Friendships

- A teenager with an intellectual disability may find understanding friendship difficult. Access AllPlay Learn's story What is bullying and what to do about it under relevant resources below.

- Read more about the steps teachers can take to support a student who is being bullied or excluded at school.

Transitions

- For more information about supporting students with disabilities when transitioning across education settings, access AllPlay Learn's [transition page](#).

- Post-school transition to adult life should begin as early as possible in school.

- Aim to increase independence by working on organisational, social and problem-solving skills, and time- and self- management skills. Provide plenty of opportunities to practise them across a range of contexts.

- It may be helpful to identify skill gaps and develop a support plan to help them be successful (e.g. social skills, academic and/or employment skills).

Other co-occurring conditions

- Some students with an intellectual disability may also be diagnosed with [autism](#), [ADHD](#), [anxiety](#), [cerebral palsy](#), or [oppositional defiant disorder](#).

Relevant resources

Visit our [resources page](#) for a range of resources that can help to create inclusive education environments for students with disabilities and developmental challenges. Some particularly relevant resources for students with autism are:

- Strengths and abilities communication checklist
- Student self-monitoring form
- Locker checklist
- Peer mediation steps poster
- Relaxation script
- AllPlay Learn Story - What is bullying and what to do about it
- AllPlay Learn Story - School uniforms
- AllPlay Learn Story - How to be organised