School supports

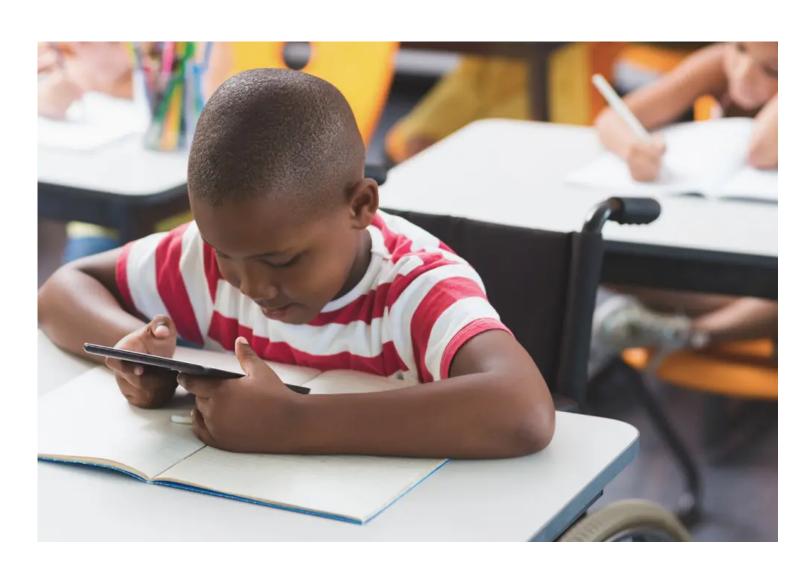# The 13 disability categories under IDEA

By Andrew M.I. Lee, JD

At a Glance

- The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires public schools to provide special education services to eligible students.

- IDEA covers 13 disability categories.

- Not every student who struggles in school qualifies.

The **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act** (IDEA) requires public schools to provide special education and related services to eligible students. But not every child who struggles in school qualifies. To be covered, a child's school performance must be "adversely affected" by a disability in one of the 13 categories below.

1. Specific learning disability (SLD)

The "specific learning disability" (SLD) category covers a specific group of learning challenges. These conditions affect a child's ability to read, write, listen, speak, reason, or do math. Here are some examples of what could fall into this category:

- **Dyslexia**
- **Dyscalculia**
- **Written expression disorder** (you may also hear this referred to as dysgraphia)

SLD is the most common category under IDEA. In the 2018–19 school year, around 33 percent of students who

qualified did so under this category.

2. Other health impairment

The "other health impairment" category covers conditions that limit a child's strength, energy, or alertness. One example is **ADHD**, which impacts attention and executive function.

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3. Autism spectrum disorder (ASD)

ASD is a developmental disability. It involves a wide range of symptoms, but it mainly affects a child's social and communication skills. It can also impact behavior.

4. Emotional disturbance

Various mental health issues can fall under the "emotional disturbance" category. They may include anxiety disorder, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and **depression** . (Some of these may also be covered under "other health impairment.")

5. Speech or language impairment

This category covers difficulties with **speech or language** . A common example is stuttering. Other examples are trouble pronouncing words or making sounds with the voice. It also covers language problems that make it hard for kids to understand words or express themselves.

6. Visual impairment, including blindness

A child who has eyesight problems is considered to have a visual impairment. This category includes both partial sight and blindness. If eyewear can correct a vision problem, then it doesn't qualify.

7. Deafness

Kids with a diagnosis of deafness fall under this category. These are kids who can't hear most or all sounds, even with a hearing aid.

8. Hearing impairment

The term "hearing impairment" refers to a hearing loss not covered by the definition of deafness. This type of loss can change over time. Being hard of hearing is not the same thing as having trouble with auditory or language processing.

9. Deaf-blindness

Kids with a diagnosis of deaf-blindness have both severe hearing and vision loss. Their communication and other needs are so unique that programs for just the deaf *or* blind can't meet them.

10. Orthopedic impairment

An orthopedic impairment is when kids lack function or ability in their bodies. An example is cerebral palsy.

11. Intellectual disability

Kids with this type of disability have below-average intellectual ability. They may also have poor communication, self-care, and social skills. Down syndrome is one example of a condition that involves an intellectual disability.

12. Traumatic brain injury

This is a brain injury caused by an accident or some kind of physical force.

13. Multiple disabilities

A child with multiple disabilities has more than one condition covered by IDEA. Having multiple issues creates educational needs that can't be met in a program designed for any one disability.

Learn how to find out if a child is **eligible for special education** . When kids are found eligible, the next step will be to create an Individualized Education Program (IEP). For kids who are in preschool or younger, you may want to learn about **early intervention** .
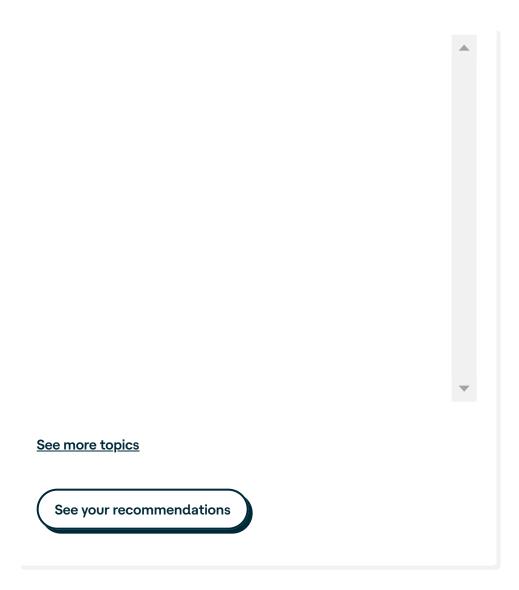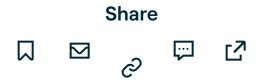
Key Takeaways

- Each of the 13 disability categories in IDEA can cover a range of difficulties.

- Dyslexia, dyscalculia, and written expression disorder fall under the "specific learning disability" category.

- "Other health impairment" can cover ADHD.

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About the Author

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