

Severe Cognitive Disability



The term **cognitive disability** is often used interchangeably with **intellectual or developmental disabilities**. A cognitive disability may be deemed to be **mild, moderate or severe** depending on the student's IQ. A **severe cognitive disability** is **intellectual functioning that is much below average and that exists concurrently with significant deficits in adaptive behaviour (how individuals adapt to environmental demands compared to others of the same age)**. Students with a **severe cognitive disability** will need **supports for most activities in the classroom, but they can learn basic skills**.

Implications for Planning and Awareness

- Meet with the student and parents early in the school year to discuss how the school can support this student's needs related to the severe cognitive disability. This could include finding out about:
 - the student's strengths, interests and areas of need
 - specific symptoms that may affect the student at school
 - any other associated disorders that need to be considered at school
 - successful strategies used at home or in the community that also could be used at school.
- Learn as much as you can about how severe cognitive disabilities may affect learning and social and emotional well-being. Reading, asking questions and talking to qualified professionals will build your understanding and help you make decisions to support the student's success at school.
- Develop a system for sharing information with relevant staff members about how this student learns, along with successful strategies.
- Collaborate with the school and/or jurisdictional team to identify and coordinate any needed consultation and services.

Your awareness needs to begin with conversations with the student's parents.

Implications for Instruction

- Determine the implications of the student's delays, including cognitive, behaviour, language, attention, fine motor (e.g., cutting, colouring, printing) and gross motor (e.g., running, jumping), to plan appropriate instruction.
- Understand that skills will develop at a slower rate, so the gap between the student and peers will always be significant.
- Provide additional supports, such as small group instruction, manipulatives, visuals to aid understanding (e.g., picture symbols), and extra exploration and practice time.
- Reduce abstraction level of concepts being taught.



- Determine the student's ability and needs in terms of speech and language. If the student is non-verbal, in collaboration with the parents and a speech-language pathologist, consider exploring augmentative communication systems.
- Ensure the student has support and, possibly, assistance with gross and fine motor activities, as needed. Younger students may have difficulty with buttons, zippers and snaps, and may require support with toilet training. Consult with the parents and an occupational therapist regarding supports.
- Maintain the student's attention and focus with short, clear instructions and reminders. Repeat instructions as often as is necessary.
- Provide as structured and predictable an environment as possible to reduce students' anxiety during transitions. Be sure to prepare the student for changes in the schedule.
- Provide the student with a work buddy to help with simple instructional and non-instructional tasks.
- Teach specific simple problem-solving strategies, and use visual supports to help the student remember the steps.
- Reduce distractions. For example, seat the student near your desk or in an area away from distractions, such as doors; provide a study carrel that all students can access; allow the student to listen to music using a headset to screen out noise.
- Help the student to organize belongings and work (e.g., label school supplies, colour code subject notebooks).
- Provide all students with opportunities for making choices throughout the day.

Implications for Social and Emotional Well-being

- Engage the student and parents in planning for transitions between grade levels and different schools.
- Provide clear expectations, consistency, structure and routine for the entire class. Rules should be specific, direct, written down and applied consistently.
- Teach the student appropriate conversational skills and social skills, such as:
 - greeting people (e.g., saying hello, no hugging)
 - taking turns
 - asking and answering questions.
- Explicitly teach social skills, such as how to read body language and expressions. Use modelling, storytelling and role-plays, along with direct instruction.
- Provide support in transitioning from one activity or place to another. Cues, routines and purposeful activity during transitions may be helpful.
- Use low-key rewards and positive reinforcement rather than punishments.
- Take steps to ensure the student does not feel left out during recess, intramural or other school activities.
- Intercede on behalf of the student with cognitive disabilities to stop any teasing, and then teach the student appropriate response strategies.

Parents know their children well and can offer insights on how to support their social and emotional well-being. There is strength in collaborating on strategies that could be used at home, at school and in the community.



As you consider the implications for this disability, think about the following questions:

1. Do I need further conversations with the parents to better understand this student's strengths and needs? Yes No
2. Do I need targeted professional learning? Yes No
If yes, what specific topics and strategies would I explore?
3. Is consultation with jurisdictional staff required? Yes No
If yes, what issues and questions would we explore?
4. Is consultation with external service providers required (e.g., Regional Educational Consulting Services, Student Health Partnership, Alberta Children's Hospital, Glenrose Hospital)? Yes No
If yes, what issues and questions would we explore?
5. Are further assessments required to assist with planning for this student? Yes No
If yes, what questions do I need answered?
6. Is service to the student from an external provider required? Yes No
If yes, what outcomes would be anticipated?

Links for further information:

Learn Alberta. Supporting Positive Behavior in Alberta Schools.

<http://www.learnalberta.ca/content/inspb2/html/index.html>

Alberta Education. Unlocking Potential: Key Components of Programming for Students with Learning Disabilities. <https://education.alberta.ca/media/385144/unlocking-potential-programming-for-students-learning-disabilities-2002.pdf>

Please note:

These websites are for information only and the user is responsible for evaluating the content and appropriate uses of the information.

