Disability Categories at a Glance

A practical introduction to special education eligibility categories for families.

A Note for Families

Eligibility categories can sound clinical and confusing. This guide explains what each category generally means and how categories fit into the special education process. Category names vary by state, so your school may use different terms. This guide is a starting point, not a substitute for individualized guidance.

The 13 Federal Categories

Autism	Differences in communication, social interaction, and behavior that affect learning.
Deaf-Blindness	Combined hearing and vision loss that creates significant communication and learning needs.
Deafness	Hearing loss so significant that a child cannot process spoken language through hearing.
Emotional Disturbance	Emotional or behavioral challenges over a long period that affect learning.
Hearing Impairment	Hearing loss, permanent or fluctuating, that affects learning but is not deafness.
Intellectual Disability	Significantly below-average thinking skills along with challenges in everyday adaptive skills.
Multiple Disabilities	Two or more disabilities together that create needs one category cannot address.
Orthopedic Impairment	A physical condition that affects movement or motor skills needed for learning.
Other Health Impairment	A health condition, such as ADHD or epilepsy, that limits strength, energy, or alertness.
Specific Learning Disability	Difficulty in areas such as reading, writing, or math, including dyslexia.
Speech or Language Impairment	Challenges with speech sounds, fluency, voice, or understanding and using language.
Traumatic Brain Injury	An acquired brain injury from an outside force that affects learning.
Visual Impairment	Vision loss, including blindness, that affects learning even with correction.

Many states also use Developmental Delay for young children, generally ages 3 through 9.

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How Categories Work

To qualify for special education, a student must meet the criteria for a category and need specially designed instruction because of it. Both parts matter. A diagnosis from a doctor alone does not automatically mean a student qualifies.

Common Misconceptions

MYTH	WHAT PARENTS SHOULD KNOW
The category decides what services my child gets.	Services are based on your child's individual needs, not the category name.
A medical diagnosis means automatic eligibility.	Schools use their own criteria. A diagnosis is important information, but the team must also find an educational need.
The category will follow my child forever.	Students are reevaluated over time, and categories can change as needs change.

DEA PERSPECTIVE

A category opens the door. It doesn't define the child.

A category is a label for eligibility, not a description of who your child is or what they can achieve.

Questions About Eligibility?

Every child is different, and no guide can replace individualized support. If you would like help understanding an eligibility decision or your child's evaluation, schedule a consultation with Distributed Education Advocacy.

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