

Diagnosis vs. Disability Category: Defining Eligibility

Many parents are surprised to find that the “disability category” qualifying their child for special education and related services is different from their “medical diagnosis”. For young children moving from Connecticut’s Birth to Three System to special education, the criteria that qualified them for early intervention services may not be the same as the criteria that makes them eligible for public pre-school services when they turn three. Federal law (IDEA - Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 2004, Part B) has 13 disability categories that states must use to determine if children, ages 3 – 21, are eligible to receive special education and related services (such as speech/language, occupational, physical therapies).

IDEA Eligibility Categories

Developmental Delay Category

Under IDEA, younger children (ages 3 – 9) may be eligible for special education and related services under a broader disability category called “Developmental Delay.” States can choose what to call this general category, how they define it, and what age range it applies. In Connecticut, this category is called “Developmental Delay”. It is for children aged 3 -5 who have general delays in their physical, cognitive, communication, social, emotional or adaptive development; and who, because of these delays, need special education and related services.

It is often difficult to diagnose very young children. With early intervention and appropriate services, children may not need special education by the time they reach Kindergarten. The “Developmental Delay” category allows preschoolers to benefit from special education and related services without being labeled with a specific disability.

Additional Disability Categories

There are 13 disability categories identified in IDEA. However, states can choose how they want to assign disability categories, as long as they cover all of the federal disability terms and definitions. These disability categories are more general in nature than a specific *diagnosis*. Only a few specific diagnoses are mentioned under federal definitions.

Connecticut uses the following disability categories to determine if a child aged 3 – 21 is eligible for special education and related services:

- Autism
- Deaf – Blindness
- Developmental Delay
- Emotional Disturbance
- Hearing Impairment
- Intellectual Disability
- Multiple Disabilities
- Orthopedic Impairment
- Specific Learning Disabilities
- Speech or Language Impaired
- Traumatic Brain Injury
- Visual Impairment
- Other Health Impaired

Here are some examples:

- A child with a medical diagnosis of apraxia may qualify for special education under “Speech Impairment.”
- A child with cerebral palsy qualifies for special education and related services under “Orthopedic Impairment.” Cerebral palsy is the medical diagnosis.

- A child with an autism spectrum disorder may qualify for special education under “Autism” or “Speech Impairment”. The child may have a medical diagnosis of Asperger’s Syndrome or Pervasive Developmental Delay – Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS) but Autism or Speech Impairment may be the eligibility category.

Who Decides a Child’s Disability Category?

The Planning and Placement Team (PPT) decides if a child is eligible for special education and related services and his/her disability eligibility category. This decision is made only after the child has been assessed and evaluated according to state and federal guidelines. Federal regulations state that determination of eligibility must:

- “Be made by a group of qualified professionals and the parent.”
- “Draw upon information from a variety of sources, including aptitude and achievement tests, parent input, teacher recommendations, physical condition, social or cultural background, and adaptive behavior.”

Schools are required by law to provide a full and individual evaluation of a child referred to special education at no cost to the child’s family. A child may not be labeled a “child with a disability” because of limited English proficiency.

Parents should recognize that a medical diagnosis does not guarantee a child will qualify for special education services.

What Families Need to Know

A disability label should open doors for their children, allowing them access to services – *not* limit them. When schools assign a child a disability category, they are doing this only to ensure that a child is eligible to receive special education or related services. A child’s disability category should not take away from his or her individual gifts and talents, lower expectations, or affect his or her placement in the general education curriculum.

Additional Resources

For more about eligibility guidelines read, “Categories of Disabilities under IDEA Law” online at www.parentcenterhub.org/repository/categories.

“Parent’s Guide to Special Education in Connecticut” published by the State Department of Education - www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/PDF/DEPS/Special/Parents_Guide_SE.pdf

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