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Mental Retardation (MR)

Introduction

"Mental Retardation" refers to significant limitations in functioning related to below average intelligence. Mental Retardation is caused by an injury, disease or abnormality of the brain that happens before the person is 18 years old. People who have Mental Retardation learn more slowly and might need assistance in other areas like communication, self-care, self-direction, health and safety, leisure, work and functional academics. The symptoms can range from Mild to Severe.

The nation's special education law, the IDEA, defines Mental Retardation as significantly sub average general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period, that adversely affects a child's educational performance." [34 Code of Federal Regulations §300.7(c)(6)]

Predisposing Factors

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition (DSM-IV), states that the causal factors for Mental Retardation may be primarily biological, primarily psychosocial, or a combination of both. In approximately 30-40% of cases, the cause for the condition is not clear. Heredity is thought to be responsible for approximately 5% of cases, early changes in the embryonic stage of development approximate 30% of the causes, problems during pregnancy or birth account for about 10%, and environmental influences and severe mental disorders are thought to be responsible for approximately 15-20% of those diagnosed with this disorder.

Diagnosis

The onset of symptoms must occur before the age of 18 years. There are two skill areas that are monitored to diagnose Mental Retardation. The ability of a person's brain to learn, think, solve problems, and make sense of the world, called IQ or Intellectual Functioning, is the first. It is typically measured by an IQ test where the average score is 100. Individuals with scores below 70 to 75 are clinically thought to have MR.

Four degrees of severity of mental retardation have been classified, based on intellectual functioning. Mild Mental Retardation is diagnosed when the IQ level ranges from 50-55 to approximately 70. Moderate Retardation describes those whose IQ ranges from 35-40 to 50-55. Severe MR includes those with an IQ level of 20-25 to 35-40, and Profound MR's range is an IQ below 20 or 25.

The second skill area used to make a diagnosis, called Adaptive Behavior or Adaptive Functioning, concerns whether the individual has the skills he or she needs to live independently. Adaptive functioning areas include: communication, self-care, social/interpersonal skills, the use of community resources, self-direction, work, leisure, health and safety. A child must have significant limitations in two or more areas of adaptive functioning to meet the diagnostic criteria.

What to Expect

Mental Retardation is indicative of the inability to learn on an average level. Often prenatal or following birth, a child will be screened for various genetic disorders or abnormal genes which may have a secondary cause of Mental Retardation.

Often limitations of a child's adaptive functioning and behavior become apparent early in childhood. Parents should continue to encourage learning new skills, which may take longer to teach. With assistance and trainings and limited to extensive supports, many individuals with Mental Retardation can live a "normal life" and with the teachings of adaptive skills, can live as independently as possible. There is no "cure" for an established disability, though with appropriate support and teaching, most individuals can and will learn to do many things.

Some adults with MR live and work independently in the community, while others depend on the support of family members and professionals. Individuals can live in a variety of settings such as independent apartments, group homes, structured apartment settings, family members' homes, or more supervised residential care.

Links for more info: <http://www.fvmr.org/>
Florida's Voice on Mental Retardation

Links for more info: <http://www.aamr.org>
American Association for Mental Retardation

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