

UNDERSTANDING THE CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDENTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY

Students with significant cognitive disabilities (SWSCD), who are appropriately identified as participating in the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP), exhibit characteristics that must be carefully considered when developing academic content that is challenging, accessible, and relevant for their schooling and life after. The following guide is intended to help frame educator and parental thinking around meeting the learning and assessment needs of SWSCD in ways that provide academic challenge and are also accessible and appropriate/relevant to students' school and post-secondary success. Aspects of learner characteristics, adaptive behaviors, and intellectual functioning are presented, below.

AREA I: LEARNER CHARACTERISTICS

SWSCD may exhibit some or all of the following characteristics:

1. Communication difficulties that affect self-determination, behavior, social interactions, and participation in multiple learning environments.
2. Uneven learning patterns in all domains including cognition, communication, socialization, and self-help.
3. Multiple disabling conditions concurrent with an intellectual disability, including physical disabilities, sensory challenges, and medical needs that impact health, stamina, and engagement in learning tasks.
4. Motor impairments, in addition to cognitive/developmental delay, that makes participation in routine tasks challenging.
5. Difficulty learning new tasks, maintaining new skills, and generalizing skills to new environments.

6. Individualized methods of accessing information in alternative ways (tactile, visual, auditory, and multi-sensory).

AREA II: ADAPTIVE BEHAVIOR

The American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD, 11th Edition) and the American Psychiatric Association have defined one component of having an intellectual disability as including at least two or more of the following impairments in adaptive behavior:

1. **Conceptual Skills:** Language, reading and writing, money, time, number concepts
2. **Social Skills:** Interpersonal skills, social responsibility, self-esteem, gullibility, naïveté, follows rules/obeys laws, avoids being victimized, social problem solving
3. **Practical Skills:** Activities of daily living (personal care), occupational skills, use of money, safety, health care, travel/transportation, schedules/routines, use of telephone
4. **Consideration for Discussion:** *Students with significant cognitive abilities probably have difficulty both learning most or all of these skills and using or transferring the skills across different settings and/or **Performance on standardized adaptive behavior scales that is at least three standard deviations below the mean.*

Example: The Adaptive Behavior Assessment System-II has a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 15 points. A score of 55 or below would indicate adaptive behavior functioning that is three standard deviations below the mean.

AREA III: INTELLECTUAL FUNCTIONING

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fifth Edition (DSM-5) outlines a range of severity, ranging from mild to profound intellectual disabilities.

Mild Intellectual Disability

- Standard Score Ranges: 50-55 to 70
- DSM-5 Severity Levels based on levels of support required in areas of adaptive

functioning

- *Conceptual Domain:* Difficulties in learning academic skills with support needed in one or more areas to meet age-related expectations.
- *Social Domain:* Displays immaturity in social interactions compared to typically developing peers. Could include difficulty in accurately perceiving peers' social cues, uses concrete communication and language skills, difficulties regulating behavior, limited understanding of risk in social situations, and is at risk for being manipulated by others.
- *Practical Domain:* May function age appropriately in personal care, but need some support with complex daily living tasks in comparison to peers. Recreational skills resemble those of age-mates, but require support in judgment related to well-being and organization around recreation.
- **Consideration for Discussion:** The student might not be considered to have significant cognitive disabilities. Other factors should be considered such as impact from communication skills, sensory disabilities, and physical disabilities.

Moderate Intellectual Disability

- Standard Score Ranges: 35-40 to 50-55
- DSM-5 Severity Levels based on levels of support required in areas of adaptive functioning:
 - *Conceptual Domain:* Conceptual skills lag markedly behind those of peers. Progress in academic skills occurs slowly across the school years and is markedly limited compared with that of peers. Ongoing assistance on a daily basis is needed to complete conceptual tasks of day-to-day life.
 - *Social Domain:* Displays marked differences from peers in social and communicative behavior across development. Spoken language is typically a primary tool for social communication but is much less complex than that of peers. Capacity for relationships is evident but individuals may not perceive or interpret social cues accurately. Social judgment and decision-making abilities are limited and caretakers must assist the person with life decisions. Communication and social limitations affect friendships with typically developing peers and

significant social and communicative support is needed in work settings for success.

- *Practical Domain:* Can care for personal needs involving eating, dressing, elimination, and hygiene although an extended period of teaching and time is needed for the individual to become independent in these areas, and reminders may be needed. Participation in all household tasks can be achieved by adulthood, although an extended period of teaching is needed, and ongoing supports will typically occur for adult-level performance. Independent employment in jobs that require limited conceptual and communication skills can be achieved, but considerable support from co-workers, supervisors, and others is needed to manage social expectations, job complexities, and ancillary responsibilities such as scheduling, transportation, health benefits, and money management. A variety of recreational skills can be developed but typically require additional supports and learning opportunities over an extended period of time. Maladaptive behavior is present in a significant minority and causes social problems.
- **Consideration for Discussion:** ***Performance on standardized intelligence tests that represent at least three standard deviations from the mean IQ score. These scores may indicate that a student has significant cognitive disabilities.*

Severe Intellectual Disability

- Standard Score Ranges: 25 to 35-40
- DSM-5 Severity Levels based on levels of support required in areas of adaptive functioning:
 - *Conceptual Domain:* Attainment of conceptual skills is limited and generally there is little understanding of written language or of concepts involving numbers, quantity, time, and money. Caretakers provide extensive supports for problem solving throughout life.
 - *Social Domain:* Spoken language is limited in terms of vocabulary and grammar. Speech may be single words or phrases and may be supplemented through augmentative means. Speech and communication are focused on the here and now within everyday events. Language is used for social communication more than for

explaining things, and there is understanding of simple speech and gestural communication. Relationships with family members and familiar others are a source of pleasure and help.

- *Practical Domain:* Requires support for all activities of daily living, including meals, dressing, bathing, and elimination and requires supervision at all times. Cannot make responsible decisions regarding well-being of self or others. Skill acquisition in all domains involves long-term teaching and ongoing support. Maladaptive behavior, including self-injury is present in a significant minority.

- **Consideration for Discussion:** ***Performance on standardized intelligence tests that represent at least three standard deviations from the mean IQ score. These scores may indicate that a student has significant cognitive disabilities.*

Profound Intellectual Disability

- Standard Score Ranges: Below 20-25
- DSM-5 Severity Levels based on levels of support required in areas of adaptive functioning:
 - *Conceptual Domain:* Skills generally involve the physical world rather than symbolic processes. May use objects in goal-directed fashion for self-care, work and recreation. Certain visuospatial skills, such as matching and sorting based on physical characteristics may be acquired. However, co-occurring motor and sensory impairments may prevent functional use of objects.
 - *Social Domain:* Has very limited understanding of symbolic communication in speech or gesture. May understand some simple instructions or gestures. May express own desires and emotions largely through nonverbal, nonsymbolic communication. Enjoys relationships with well-known family members, caretakers, and familiar others, and initiates and responds to social interactions through gestural and emotional cues. Co-occurring sensory and physical impairments may prevent many social activities.
 - *Practical Domain:* Dependent on others for all aspects of daily physical care, health, and safety, although may be able to participate in some of these activities as well. Individuals without severe physical impairments may assist with some

daily work tasks at home. Simple actions with objects may be the basis of participation in some vocational activities with high levels of ongoing support. Recreational activities may involve, for example, enjoyment in listening to music, watching movies, going out for walks, or participating in water activities, all with the support of others. Co-occurring physical and sensory impairments are frequent barriers to participation (beyond watching) in home, recreational, and vocational activities. Maladaptive behavior is present in a significant minority.

- **Consideration for Discussion:** ***Performance on standardized intelligence tests that represent at least three standard deviations from the mean IQ score. These scores may indicate that a student has significant cognitive disabilities.*

****Note:** Section 200.1 in the Notice of Proposed Rule Making in the Federal Register on March 20, 2003, proposed defining “students with the most significant cognitive disabilities” as students with disabilities under the IDEA whose intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior are three or more standard deviations below the mean.