

# Disability Glossary Terms

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The following disability related terms and definitions are often associated with and provide a common, working language for ADL's educational anti-bias programs and resources.

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## A

**ABILITY:** Having the mental and/or physical condition to engage in one or more major life activities (e.g., seeing, hearing, speaking, walking, breathing, performing manual tasks, learning or caring for oneself).

**ABLEISM:** The marginalization and/or oppression of people who have disabilities, including temporary, developmental, physical, psychiatric and/or intellectual disabilities.

**AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE:** A means of communication that uses hand gestures to represent letters and words, and the primary sign language used by people with hearing disability in the United States and Canada (devised in part by Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet on the basis of sign language in France).

**ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY:** A device or piece of equipment used to maintain or improve the functional facility of people with disabilities (e.g., brace, crutches, descriptive video, hearing aid, prosthetic device, walker, wheelchair).

**ATTENTION DEFICIT (HYPERACTIVITY) DISORDER:** Attention-deficit (hyperactivity) disorder is a condition affecting children and adults that is characterized by problems with attention, impulsivity, and overactivity. Science recognizes three subtypes of ADD or ADHD: inattentive, hyperactive-impulsive, and combined. A diagnosis of one type or another depends on the specific symptoms that person has.

## B

**BLINDNESS:** Partial or "legal" visual impairment based on standard vision being defined as 20/20 visual acuity and an average range of 180 degrees in peripheral vision; thus, people are defined as being legally blind if after methods of correction, such as glasses or contact lenses, they have a visual acuity of 20/200 or higher, or a range of peripheral vision under 20 degrees.

## C

**CEREBRAL PALSY:** A functional disorder caused by damage to a child's brain during pregnancy, delivery, or shortly after birth. Cerebral Palsy is characterized by one or more movement disorders, such as spasticity (tight limb muscles), purposeless movements, rigidity (severe form of spasticity), or a lack of balance. People with cerebral palsy may also experience seizures, speech, hearing and/or visual impairments, and/or mental retardation.

**CLOSED CAPTIONING:** An on-screen system that allows people with a hearing disability to view television with spoken words written across the bottom of the screen.

## D

**DEAFNESS:** A total or partial inability to hear, which can be genetic or also acquired through disease, most commonly from meningitis in childhood or rubella in a woman during pregnancy.

**DEAF-BLINDNESS:** A hearing and visual disability, the combination of which can cause severe communication and other developmental and educational difficulties.

**DESCRIPTIVE VIDEO:** Film media designed for people with visual disability that provides additional narration detailing the visual elements of a film (the action of the characters, locations, costumes, etc.) without interfering with the actual dialogue and sound effects.

**DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITY:** A long lasting cognitive disability occurring before age 22 that limits one or more major life activities (self-care, independent living, learning, mobility, etc.), and is likely to continue indefinitely (e.g., Autism).

**DISABILITY:** A mental or physical condition that restricts an individual's ability to engage in one or more major life activities (e.g., seeing, hearing, speaking, walking, communicating, sensing, breathing, performing manual tasks, learning, working or caring for oneself).

**DOWN SYNDROME:** A chromosomal condition (trisomy 21) caused by the presence of one extra chromosome, and characterized by delayed physical and mental development, and often identifiable by certain physical characteristics, such as a round face, slanting eyes, and a small stature.

**DWARFISM:** A genetic condition resulting in short stature.

## E

**EMOTIONAL DISABILITY:** One or more psychiatric disabilities exhibited over a long period of time and to a marked degree, e.g., an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with others; inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under ordinary circumstances; a generally pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression; or a tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal problems.

**EPILEPSY:** A physical condition that occurs when there is a sudden, brief disturbance in the function of the brain, and alters an individual's consciousness, movements or actions. Most individuals with epilepsy can reduce or eliminate the risk of seizures through the regular use of appropriate medication.

## H

**HANDICAP:** Any obstacle that decreases a person's opportunity for success (e.g., discriminatory practices, inaccessible buildings/public places/transportation, insufficient insurance/training/resources, negative attitudes).

**HEALTH DISABILITY:** A temporary or permanent health impairment that affects one or more major life activities (e.g., AIDS, arthritis, cancer, diabetes, drug addiction, heart disease).

**HEARING DISABILITY:** Partial or full hearing loss due to either a decibel loss (person hears all sounds much more softly than a person with complete hearing), or a frequency loss (person hears a pitch of a sound better than others, thus a person with frequency loss would hear all of some words, some parts of other words, and would not hear some words at all).

## I

**INCLUSION:** An environment and commitment to respect, represent and accept diverse social groups and identities; an environment where all people feel like they belong. (In K-12 learning environments, inclusion can sometimes also refer to the practice of integrating students with disabilities into the classroom setting.)

**INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY:** Consistent demonstration of general cognitive functioning that is determined to be 1.5 standard deviations or more below the mean of the general population on the basis of a comprehensive evaluation.

## L

**LEARNING DISABILITY:** A cognitive impairment in comprehension or in using language, spoken or written, that manifests itself in a person's ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations (e.g. Dyslexia, Dysnomia, Dysgraphia). The term does not include persons who have learning difficulties that are primarily the result of intellectual disability, emotional disability, or environmental, cultural or economic disadvantage.

**LITTLE PERSON:** A person with short-stature. In general, people with short-stature prefer the term "Little Person" to describe their physical condition. The term "dwarf" is considered derogatory.

## M

**MENTAL ILLNESS:** Refers to any illness or impairment that has significant psychological or behavioral manifestations, is associated with painful or distressing symptoms and impairs an individual's level of functioning in certain areas of life (e.g., Anxiety Disorder, Depression, Bipolar disorder, Obsession-Compulsion, Schizophrenia).

## O

**ORTHOPEDIC IMPAIRMENT:** Physical disability caused by a congenital anomaly (e.g., club foot), impairments caused by disease (e.g., poliomyelitis), and impairment from other causes (e.g., cerebral palsy, fractures or burns which cause contractures.)

## P

**PARAPLEGIA:** The paralysis of the legs and lower part of the body and is usually caused by injury or disease in the lower spinal cord, or by brain disorders such as cerebral palsy.

**PARKINSON'S DISEASE:** A progressive disorder caused by the brain's inability to manufacture a chemical that signals the muscles to move. Symptoms include involuntary tremors, stiff movements, and/or lack of balance.

**PEOPLE FIRST:** Acknowledging the personhood of individuals with disabilities before their disability (e.g., "people with disabilities", "person who uses a wheelchair", "person with cerebral palsy", "person has a physical disability", etc.).

**POST-POLIO SYNDROME:** A condition that affects a person who has had poliomyelitis (polio) after recovery, and is characterized by muscle weakness, joint and muscle pain and fatigue.

**PHYSICAL DISABILITY:** One or more physical impairments that substantially limit one or more major life activities (e.g., seeing, hearing, speaking, walking, breathing, performing manual tasks, learning, or caring for oneself).

**PROSTHESIS:** An artificial device used to replace a missing body part, such as a limb, tooth, eye or heart valve.

## Q

**QUADRIPLEGIA:** The paralysis of a person's four limbs.

## R

**REASONABLE ACCOMMODATION:** A modification made in facilities, a job restructuring or rescheduling, or a modification of equipment and devices to make an environment accessible and useable by people with disabilities.

## S

**SPEECH IMPAIRMENT:** A communication disorder characterized by impaired articulation, language impairment or voice impairment (e.g., Dysfluency, Stuttering).

## T

**TOURETTE SYNDROME:** A genetic, neurological disorder characterized by repetitious, involuntary body movements and uncontrollable vocal sounds.

## V

**VISUAL DISABILITY:** A form of eyesight impairment that varies in severity and in more acute cases cannot be corrected by glasses or contact lenses.