

What is Intellectual Disability?

The following description of intellectual disability is informed by "Introduction to Intellectual Disability" developed by the Criminal Justice Support Network Intellectual Disability Rights Service <http://www.idrs.org.au/home/index.php>

The sections in italics below are direct quotes from the document.

Intellectual Disability is a disability that affects the way a person learns. It might occur at birth or develop under the age of 18. A person with an intellectual disability may take a long time to learn things. He or she may have difficulty reading and writing. It may be hard for her, or him, to communicate and understand what others are saying. Maintaining eye contact can be hard. Abstract concepts can be challenging and it may be hard for the person to plan and problem-solve, to adapt to new or unfamiliar situations even though the person might be able to present themselves well in a "cloak of competence".

Clinically, and for the purposes of proving in a court that a person has an intellectual disability, intellectual disability is best assessed by a psychologist as:

- an IQ of 70 or under, PLUS
- deficits in at least 2 areas of adaptive behaviour, that is:
 - Communication or self-care
 - home living
 - social skills
 - self direction
 - leisure and work or learning.

In clinical terms, intellectual disability is often defined in terms of the severity of the disability:

<i>Level of disability</i>	<i>% of people with intellectual disability</i>	<i>IQ</i>
<i>BORDERLINE</i>		<i>70-75</i>
<i>MILD</i>	<i>75%</i>	<i>55-70</i>
<i>MODERATE</i>	<i>20%</i>	<i>30-55</i>
<i>SEVERE</i>	<i>5%</i>	<i>under 30</i>

This approach, however, encourages a focus on the deficits of the person, rather than the abilities and is a "medical" way of looking at disability, but for the purposes of proving to a court that a person does have an intellectual disability, it is what is required.

Sociological definition of intellectual disability

A more constructive and pragmatic definition is to define intellectual disability in terms of the support needs of an individual. This approach sees the effect of the disability as something that will vary and can be increased or decreased by external factors. It does not view intellectual disability as an unchangeable characteristic of the individual. This definition does not rely on the capacity of the person being set in stone, but also on the environment and the support that they receive.¹

¹ http://www.idrs.org.au/pdf/IDRS_%20Introduction_intellectual%20disability_17Feb09.pdf