

Mental Retardation Among Children

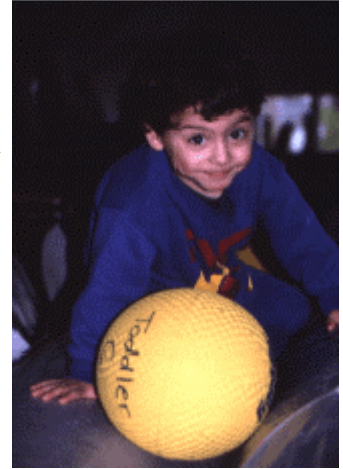


***FACT:** An estimated 12 of every 1,000 U.S. school children have mental retardation.*

Mental retardation is a disorder characterized by a significantly below average score on a test of mental ability and limitations in such areas as self-direction; school, work, and leisure activities; and daily-living, social, and communication skills.

The cause of mental retardation in most children is not known. However, some of the most common known causes include genetic factors, such as those that result in Down syndrome or fragile X syndrome, and environmental factors, such as drinking alcohol during pregnancy, which can cause fetal alcohol syndrome. Fortunately, with the widespread use of vaccines, the number of children with mental retardation as a result of certain infectious diseases (such as rubella) has decreased.

During the 1995-1996 school year, about 600,000 U.S. 6- to 21-year-old children with mental retardation received special educational services at a cost of about \$3.3 billion. Although it is difficult to estimate the costs of caring for children with more serious forms of mental retardation, the costs may be 10 times higher than those of caring for a child without a disability.



At CDC, we have one of the few programs in the world that conducts active, ongoing monitoring of the number of children with mental retardation in a large, multiracial metropolitan area.

In 1991, CDC started the **Metropolitan Atlanta Developmental Disabilities Surveillance Program (MADDSP)** to monitor the number of 3- to 10-year-old children living in the metropolitan Atlanta area who have one or more of the following conditions: mental retardation, cerebral palsy, hearing impairment, and vision impairment. CDC added autism spectrum disorders to the program in 1998.

MADDSP also provides opportunities for special studies through which CDC staff members can identify risk factors for these disabilities and determine whether steps taken to prevent disabilities have been effective.

Related CDC Activities

- Fetal alcohol syndrome surveillance programs to monitor the number of children with FAS in five states.
- Community-based studies to find effective ways for parents to help improve developmental outcomes for their children.
- Vaccine programs to prevent infectious diseases that may cause mental retardation.
- The Children's Longitudinal Development Study, an ongoing study of risk factors for developmental disabilities among children identified through MADDSP.
- The Follow-up Study of Children with Developmental Disabilities, which examines current functioning and the presence of secondary conditions among young adults with mental retardation and other developmental disabilities.

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