MILD INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY
Ontario Ministry of Education: Special Education Companion

Characteristics:

Mild intellectual disabilities are defined by the Ministry of Education as follows:

Mild intellectual disability: a learning disorder characterized by:

a) an ability to profit educationally within a regular class with the aid of considerable curriculum modification and supportive service;
b) an inability to profit educationally within a regular class because of slow intellectual development;
c) a potential for academic learning, independent social adjustment, and economic self-support.

A complete list of categories and definitions of exceptionalities can be found in the ministry document Special Education: A Guide for Educators (2001), which can be accessed at: http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/guide.html.

All students, including exceptional students, have their own unique set of learning strengths and needs. It is as important to identify a student’s strengths as it is to determine his or her needs. Many factors – physical, intellectual, educational, cultural, emotional, and social – influence a student’s ability to learn. The student’s strengths can be used to address his or her weaknesses. Understanding and noting them is critical to appropriate program development. Many factors associated with mild intellectual disabilities correlate with learning difficulties. Education jurisdictions typically use a variety of assessment methods to identify mild intellectual disabilities. Some of these methods include IQ scores or percentiles, adaptive skills tests, skills-based assessments, and levels of academic achievement. Current approaches for helping students who have learning disabilities, as well as current theories of intelligence, including the multiple intelligence and emotional intelligence theories, also suggest alternative instructional strategies and accommodations that teachers can use to meet a wide range of student needs. Students who have mild intellectual disabilities demonstrate a significant range of strengths and needs. It is important to remember that not all students will demonstrate all characteristics.

With appropriate support, students who have mild intellectual disabilities have the potential to:

* live independently;
* achieve sustained employment;
* use their local community’s facilities and services;
* participate in meaningful family and social relationships;
* participate in leisure and recreational activities.
While not all of these students will demonstrate all characteristics simultaneously, they will usually all demonstrate an increasing gap between their abilities and the typical abilities of same-age peers. As the demands of the curriculum and daily living become more complex and abstract, the potential for these students to experience failure increases.

**Delays in Cognitive Development**
Students who have mild intellectual disabilities may demonstrate:

* literacy and numeracy levels that are typically three or more years below their age appropriate placement;
* a tendency to be distracted easily;
* short attention and interest spans;
* difficulty with all academic subjects;
* delays in speech and/or language acquisition;
* difficulty remembering.

**Difficulties with Appropriate Social Relationships**
Students who have mild intellectual disabilities may demonstrate:

* difficulty understanding non-verbal cues (e.g., body language, gestures);
* difficulty with social language and behaviour;
* difficulty understanding and expressing a range of emotions;
* immature behaviour;
* obsessive/compulsive behaviour.

**Delays in Adaptive Skill Areas**
Students who have mild intellectual disabilities may:

* appear clumsy;
* require support with personal care/hygiene skills;
* use simplistic, vague, or colloquial language;
* require consistency in routines;
* frequently “lose” pencils, pens, books, and assignments.

**Low Self-Esteem**
Students who have mild intellectual disabilities may:

* be afraid to take risks or to try new things;
* use avoidance or misbehaviour to divert attention from their lack of ability;
* demonstrate withdrawal as a response to feeling overwhelmed or to fear of failure;
* require help or significant support to establish a positive self-image;
* lack independent work habits;
* be easily frustrated;
* be vulnerable to peer pressure, teasing, and embarrassment.

**Difficulties Understanding Abstract Concepts**
Students who have mild intellectual disabilities may:

* be easily confused by abstract and figurative language;
* interpret language literally;
* require support to generalize and to apply learned concepts to other situations;
* enjoy routine and repetitive tasks.

To help students who have mild intellectual disabilities live and work in the community and/or proceed to postsecondary learning, teachers may need to arrange to space these students’ courses out over a longer time. Alternative expectations based on each student’s unique strengths and needs as identified in his or her Individual Education Plan (IEP) may need to form part of the programming for these students.

These alternative expectations may include, as appropriate, those related to the following areas:

* personal life management (social interaction, budget management, meal planning and preparation, use of public transit, self-control);
* self-care skills (personal health care, grooming, safety);
* employability skills (attendance, punctuality, work ethic, task completion);
* vocational skills, apprentice-like jobs and experiences;
* leisure and recreation (sports, fitness, hobbies, use of the library, use of community facilities);
* self-advocacy skills (getting help, assertiveness training);
* social skills (social language, turn-taking, negotiation, conflict resolution, bullying prevention and avoidance);
* skills for building and maintaining friendships and relationships;
* development of personal values.

Teaching Strategies and Suggestions

General Strategies and Suggestions:

Students who have mild intellectual disabilities benefit from being part of a heterogeneous group of students their own age. As the curriculum becomes increasingly more conceptual, however, and as the pace of the introduction of new concepts increases, these students may experience considerable failure or show high levels of frustration. To support the building of self-esteem in these students, teachers should ensure that they are provided with and use materials that look similar to what the rest of the class is using. In addition, classroom resources and materials should reflect the chronological age of the student, regardless of the expectations set out in them or being addressed. Appropriate program interventions should be implemented as soon as the student is identified, to build and foster a sense of success in the student and to meet his or her strengths and needs. Some students, in addition to their cognitive disabilities, have physical and sensory disabilities that further challenge their abilities to learn and to exercise control in their environment.

Strategies and Suggestions Related to the Classroom Environment

Students who have mild intellectual disabilities, like all students, require a supportive and encouraging learning environment that highlights and celebrates their strengths. The optimum learning environment for all students is predictable and safe from situations that may humiliate or embarrass them.
The teacher may:
* provide a supportive and encouraging learning environment;
* set expectations for the student that are similar to those for all students in the class;
* model and foster a climate of acceptance for all students;
* arrange the student’s timetable to enable him or her to access the courses and/or resource groups that are appropriate to his or her special needs;
* provide forewarning and opportunities for the student to practise in simulated situations to help the student successfully cope with transition and change;
* minimize the number of transitions that occur in the school day and as the student moves from the primary to the junior and intermediate divisions;
* reduce distractions in the classroom;
* provide the student with preferential seating or seating that is appropriate to his or her sensory needs (e.g., away from doors and windows and near the blackboard);
* use study carrels or room dividers;
* provide the student with a headset to muffle noise;
* arrange seating to place a student at risk of being isolated next to supportive peers.

Strategies and Suggestions Related to Behaviour

Students who have mild intellectual disabilities may demonstrate a tendency to be distracted easily and may exhibit behaviours that are inappropriate in the school setting. It is important to acknowledge that all behaviour is communication. By structuring a learning environment that discourages inappropriate behaviours, teachers can minimize disruption, increase learning time, and help all students develop self-awareness and self-control.

The teacher may:
* implement support programs for the student such as peer tutoring, “circle of friends”, cocurricular coaches, buddy systems, and recess support;
* teach the student self-advocacy skills (e.g., asking for help, explaining his or her strengths and needs);
* provide frequent opportunities for the student to learn and practise appropriate behaviour in social situations;
* establish and maintain consistent routines and classroom rules;
* reinforce positive behaviour.

Strategies and Suggestions Related to Organization

Among the most important skills needed by students who have mild intellectual disabilities are those required to become independent learners: the abilities to manage time, organize their workspace, and learn study and test preparation skills.

The teacher may:
* teach the student the use of personal organizers (e.g., a personal timetable that colour-codes or highlights important information, a checklist for supplies and for readiness behaviour, a homework journal or communication book);
* teach the student time-management strategies (e.g., to use a watch or a clock to follow a schedule);
* record up-coming assignments and events on a calendar for the student;
* teach simplified note-taking techniques (e.g., using a highlighter to identify main ideas or facts, outlining);
* provide advance organizers to demonstrate the key and subsidiary parts of lessons;
* teach the student to use folders for finished and unfinished work;
* teach the student to use graphic organizers, mapping, and semantic webbing techniques;
* teach the student to use “self talk”, and model different study techniques;
* teach test-taking skills for multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, and essay-type tests;
* simultaneously give the student instructions orally, visually, and pictorially.

**Strategies and Suggestions Related to Motivation**

All students require opportunities to demonstrate their strengths, to experience success, and to participate in learning opportunities that are similar to those of their peers. Learning can be enhanced through a variety of teacher-directed, self-directed, and collaborative group situations, as well as highly motivational instructional materials. In addition, teachers should provide students with learning opportunities in the context of real-life situations.

**The teacher may:**
* offer the student hands-on learning opportunities (e.g., teach science by conducting experiments);
* use real-life experiences as learning opportunities (e.g., catering lunch, setting up audiovisual equipment, landscaping, providing office help);
* use technology and software as tools for instruction, additional practice, or to demonstrate learning;
* provide the student with frequent opportunities for large- and small-group learning, peer assistance, and/or peer tutoring;
* encourage the student to use tools that make automatic corrections (e.g., word-processing software with automatic spellers);
* offer incentives and rewards for effort and good work;
* focus on the student’s strengths and abilities.

**Strategies and Suggestions Related to Lesson Presentation**

It is essential that the focus of teaching the Ontario curriculum to students who have mild intellectual disabilities be on real-life applications of functional literacy and numeracy skills at the appropriate level. In general, these students do not learn efficiently. Because it may take some students longer to learn all the material in the curriculum, it is essential to maximize time on task and to provide students with extended and multiple opportunities for practice.

**The teacher may:**
* “chunk” the skill or instruction into smaller steps;
* sequence the steps involved in learning a skill or concept or in completing a project (e.g., label them first, second, etc.);
* use a number of instruction methods (e.g., make use of concrete materials, visual aids, tactile/kinesthetic aids, captioned videos, and software; read material aloud);
* teach the same concepts and skills in many situations, so that the student will learn to perceive them as generalized;
* point out the relationships between ideas/concepts and vocabulary;
* provide opportunities for the student to work in pairs, collaborative learning groups, and small instructional groups, and with a peer tutor;
* provide extended time for the student to complete assignments;
* provide the student with many opportunities for practice, using techniques such as verbal rehearsal, mnemonic devices, graphic organizers, and rote memorization;
* keep homework to a minimum and ensure that it has a real-life application;
* schedule in “wait time” to allow the student to provide oral answers to questions;
* speak at a slower rate during instructional time;
* call the student’s name before asking him or her a question;
* teach the student the meaning of key directional words;
* reproduce instructional material instead of requiring the student to copy it;
* colour-code material by subject.

Strategies and Suggestions Related to Independence

As part of their classroom experience, students who have mild intellectual disabilities need to be provided with opportunities to acquire skills to become independent, to self-advocate, and to live and work in the community.

The teacher may:
* use hand signals as cues and reinforcers for behaviour (e.g., for getting the student’s attention, to let the student know that he or she has given an appropriate response);
* use both direct instruction and support to help the student move towards self-assessment, goal-setting, self-monitoring, and self-reflection;
* develop partnerships with community agencies and/or articulation programs with businesses to assist the student in achieving an appropriate level of independence for community living;
* provide a “job coach” to help the student learn how to apply employability skills in a job context.

Specific Skill Strategies

Strategies and Suggestions Related to Speaking

To develop speaking skills, the teacher may encourage students to:

* practise speaking for different purposes (e.g., asking for clarification, using the telephone, initiating conversations, taking turns in conversations);
* learn the meaning of idioms, metaphors, and similes;
* learn appropriate ways to express his or her needs and frustrations;
* use correct pronunciation in everyday speech;
* use language that elaborates and clarifies as much as possible;
* practise speaking to a partner, then to a small group, then to a larger group;
* develop self-talk or thinking-out-loud strategies;
* repeat directions;
* repeat or summarize important information frequently;
* make presentations using slides, pictures, or concrete materials instead of text.

Strategies and Suggestions Related to Reading
To develop reading skills, the teacher may encourage students to:

* demonstrate reading-like behaviour;
* develop a picture booklet of new vocabulary;
* keep a booklet of new words classified into categories (e.g., hobby words, special subject words);
* build a sight vocabulary of words and phrases used for survival, found in the environment, and used frequently in everyday life;
* read using both print and non-print sources (e.g., read-aloud programs, stories on tape).

Strategies and Suggestions Related to Writing and Spelling

To develop writing and spelling skills, the teacher may encourage students to:

* write for a specific real-life purpose (e.g., shopping list, to-do list, business letters, résumés, job applications, class newsletters);
* use one editing strategy at a time (e.g., peer editing);
* use a variety of writing organizers;
* use a scribe;
* use speech-to-text software;
* use a one-minute-blitz strategy, where a student writes for a minute, then counts and charts words, with the goal of increasing, with continued practice, the number of words written in a minute;
* use a multi-sensory approach to word study;
* use phonemic patterning strategies to improve spelling (e.g., distinguish root words, suffixes, prefixes, word families);
* use a pencil grip.

Strategies and Suggestions Related to Mathematics

The Ontario Curriculum includes many mathematics expectations that can be used by students to learn personal life-management and employment skills such as the following: budgeting as it relates to employment and family life, managing time, making purchases, managing day-to-day and long-term costs, establishing and managing credit, establishing an affordable household, becoming involved in the community, maintaining nutrition and physical fitness, taking medications as needed for personal health.

To develop mathematics skills, the teacher may encourage students to:

* use real-life situations to learn and practice concepts, computations, and skills;
* use an abacus, concrete materials, number lines, manipulatives, charts, and calculators as aids;
* use drill-and-practise software;
* use pictorial clues;
* use dotted lines or graph paper to line up math problems, to determine place value, or when adding and subtracting two-digit numbers;
* colour-code numbers in place value tasks;
* use sample sheets that illustrate problem types and that explain difficult words;

**Strategies and Suggestions Related to Assessment**

Students who have mild intellectual disabilities require frequent opportunities to demonstrate their learning using methods that reflect their strengths.

**The teacher may:**

* help a student who is leaving the school system create an individualized portfolio;
* use alternative forms of assessment (e.g., oral tests, demonstrations, tape recording);
* extend the time allowed the student for completion of assignments or tests;
* provide the student with word processors, calculators, and other learning aids during tests;
* allow the students to give an oral report or answer orally;
* use pictorial cues for instructions;
* highlight key words in questions;
* give the student frequent short quizzes in lieu of long tests that cover a broad base of content;
* change question types from essay to fill-in-the-blank, multiple-choice, short-answer, etc.;
* give the student practice questions;
* simplify the wording of test questions, without changing the intent of the expectations;
* read test questions aloud.

**Assessment Accommodations**

To provide accommodations for a student who mild intellectual disabilities, the teacher may:

* adapt the assessment format (e.g., make it an oral test, a practical demonstration, an interview, a construction, a tape-recorded test);
* allow the student to write down the main points and to expand on them verbally;
* allow the student to use assistive devices and technology resources, such as a Kurzweil reader, a speech synthesizer, speech-to-text software; etc;
* allow the use of augmentative and alternative communication systems;
* divide the test into parts and give it to the student one section at a time or over a period of days;
* provide the student with a quiet location, free from distractions;
* allow the student additional time, when required, to complete the tests;
* read or clarify questions for the student and encourage the student, without assisting or providing the response, to rephrase questions in his or her own words;
* highlight key words or instructions for emphasis;
* allow the student to use a calculator where appropriate;
* allow the student flexibility, as appropriate, in the number of questions to be answered relating to the same skill;
* allow audiotaped responses or verbatim scribing of responses to test questions;
* provide prompts for the purpose of drawing the student’s attention back to the test;
* provide periodic supervised breaks.