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What Is Mental Retardation?

DEFINITION

The term **mental retardation** is used when mental functioning and deficits in such skills as communicating, taking care of oneself, and functioning socially cause a child to learn and develop more slowly than peers. Children with mental retardation may take longer to learn to speak, walk, and take care of personal needs (such as dressing or eating). In terms of schoolwork, they are able to learn, but they may take longer to master specific skills. Most people with mental retardation learn to do many, many things. It just takes them more time and effort than others.

In the United States, the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), signed into law in 1990, guides schools in providing early intervention, special education, and related services to students with disabilities, including those with mental retardation. It defines **mental retardation** as

... significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period, that adversely affects a child's educational performance. (Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, 1990)

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To diagnose mental retardation, professionals look at both the child's mental abilities and his or her adaptive skills, as IDEA requires. More than 90 percent of all students with mental retardation have **mild mental retardation** (see *Figure 1.1*). This group is sometimes referred to as "educable mentally retarded." Most of the states that offer special education services for students with mild mental retardation use IQs (intelligence quotients) between 50 and 70 as a partial basis for determining eligibility. (These scores are more than two standard deviations below the mean.)

States use IQs of between 35–40 and 50–55 to determine eligibility for services for **moderate retardation** (see *Table 1.1*). This group of students, sometimes referred to as "trainable mentally retarded," represents about 5 percent of all students with mental retardation.

Students with **moderate, severe, or profound retardation** need ongoing assistance in most areas of practical living skills and are generally more dependent on others for care. This is the smallest group of students with mental retardation (less than 2 percent).

Figure 1.1 Relations Between Mild, Moderate, Severe, and Profound Retardation

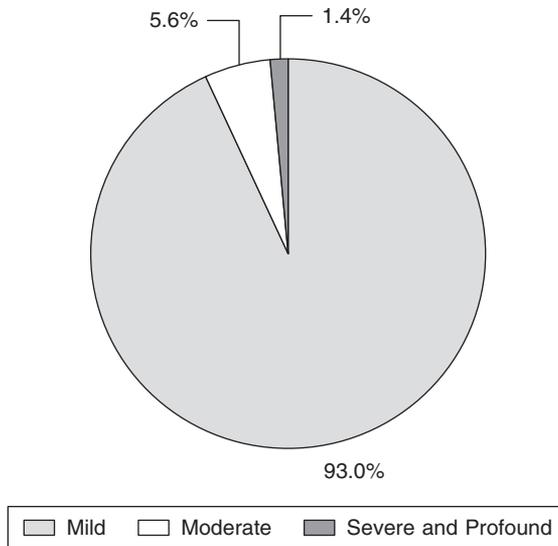


Table 1.1 Levels of Retardation

<i>Severity</i>	<i>IQ Range</i>
Mild	50-55 to 70-75
Moderate	35-40 to 50-55
Severe	20-25 to 35-40
Profound	Below 20-25

PREVALENCE

As many as 3 out of every 100 people in the United States have mental retardation (American Association on Mental Retardation, 2002b), and rates in Canada are similar to those in the United States. Almost 613,000 children aged 6–21 have some level of mental retardation and need special education (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). In fact, 1 out of every 10 children receives special education because of some form of mental retardation.