

What is a sensory impairment?

For the purposes of this guidance document, sensory impairments include visual impairment, deaf or hard of hearing, and deafblind.

A “**visual impairment**, including blindness, means an impairment in vision that, even with correction, adversely affects a child’s educational performance. The term includes both partial sight and blindness” (34 CFR, 300.8(c)(13)).

“**Deafness** means a hearing impairment that is so severe that the child is impaired in processing linguistic information through hearing, with or without amplification, that adversely affects a child’s educational performance” (34 CFR, 300.8(c)(3)). “**Hearing impairment** means an impairment in hearing, whether permanent or fluctuating, that adversely affects a child’s educational performance but that is not included under the definition of deafness” (34 CFR, 300.8(c)(5)).

“**Deaf-blindness** means concomitant hearing and visual impairments, the combination of which causes such severe communication and other developmental and educational needs that they cannot be accommodated in special education programs solely for children with deafness or children with blindness”(34 CFR 300.8(c)(2)).

What is a specific learning disability?

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) defines a **specific learning disability** (SLD) as “a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia” (34 CFR, 300.8(c)(10)(i)). IDEA goes on to clarify disorders that are not included in the definition of SLD. “Specific learning disability *does not include* learning problems that are *primarily* the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of intellectual disability, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage” 34 CFR, 300.8(c)(10)(ii).

What does “not primarily the result of” mean when considering students with sensory impairments?

As noted above, the IDEA recognizes that a specific learning disability does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of intellectual disability, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. These are often referred to as exclusionary factors. A common misconception is that the mere presence of a sensory impairment automatically rules out specific learning disability. Rather, a sensory impairment can coexist with a specific learning disability (including dyslexia and related disorders). Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) committees need to consider this possibility, particularly when students’ academic skills are not progressing as expected despite receiving adequate instruction and appropriate supports and services to meet the needs that result from the sensory impairment. It may be that the sensory impairment does not fully explain the student’s current academic underachievement. For some students, the sensory impairment may be a contributing factor but is not what is *primarily* causing the observed academic underachievement. For these students, a specific learning disability may also be present.

The presence of a specific learning disability in addition to a sensory impairment may create obstacles to learning and affect rates of progress and growth. Understanding if additional disabilities are present can help educators develop appropriate interventions and plan for an effective Individualized Education Program (IEP) that meets all the student’s needs. It is important to note, however, that the identification of a coexisting

disability is not a prerequisite for a student to receive appropriate academic interventions and supports. A student who is eligible for special education services should receive any appropriate support that will enable him or her to progress in the general curriculum. In other words, needs should drive the student's services not the student's eligibility category. Nonetheless, identification of all the student's disabilities will ultimately aid the ARD committee in better understanding the overall needs of the student and planning an appropriate IEP.

What are some considerations when evaluating a student with a sensory impairment for a potential learning disability?

There is no one size fits all approach to assessing students with sensory impairments. Sensory impairments occur across a continuum with varied impacts on the student's access and progress in the general curriculum. The multidisciplinary evaluation team must work together to develop an individualized assessment plan that is responsive to the student's needs and gathers the data necessary to make informed decisions.

Because students with sensory impairments have varied and unique sets of educational needs, multidisciplinary teams must avoid working independently on evaluations. A collaborative approach is necessary. The evaluation team needs to include all required members along with those who bring specific expertise regarding the student's individual sensory needs and appropriate considerations when conducting the evaluation.

Multidisciplinary evaluation teams must ensure that "assessments are selected and administered so as best to ensure that if an assessment is administered to a child with impaired sensory, manual, or speaking skills, the assessment results accurately reflect the child's aptitude or achievement level or whatever other factors the test purports to measure, rather than reflecting the child's impaired sensory, manual, or speaking skills (unless those skills are the factors that the test purports to measure)" (34 CFR, 300.304(c)(3)).

The use of multiple sources of data from a variety of sources is critical to helping teams make an appropriate determination regarding the presence of a learning disability. As part of the evaluation, a careful review of the student's response to evidence-based academic instruction can clarify how a student's skills and progress, or lack thereof, compares to grade-level standards and expected growth rates.

Through a collaborative approach, appropriate assessments, and multiple sources of data, the team can ensure identified learning difficulties are appropriately recognized as being the result of the sensory impairment or being the result of another root cause and, once those distinctions are made, the team can better determine appropriate supports for their student.

Resources

[The Legal Framework for the Child-Centered Special Education Process](#)

[NCLD White Paper: What is a Specific Learning Disability is NOT: Examining Exclusionary Factors](#)

[Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students: Eligibility for Special Education](#)

[Students with Visual Impairments: Eligibility for Special Education](#)

[Child Find, Evaluation, and ARD Supports Network](#)

[Texas Sensory Support Network](#)