

Easterseals Recognizes Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month

Since September 2020, Easterseals has highlighted various awareness days and months related to the services we provide. So far, we have featured articles about National Rehabilitation Awareness Week, National Physical Therapy Month, International Day of Persons with Disabilities, and International Day of Acceptance. Our goals are to increase awareness of the issues impacting our families and to educate the community about disabilities and special needs, as well as our services.

In March, we are focusing on Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month. In 1987, President Ronald Reagan proclaimed March as a time to increase “public awareness of the needs and the potential of Americans with developmental disabilities” and to provide the “encouragement and opportunities they need to lead productive lives and to achieve their full potential.”

Each year, the National Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities, Association of University Centers on Disabilities, and National Disability Rights Network partner on a campaign to encourage people with and without disabilities to work together to form strong communities. Easterseals is proud to take part in this important call for inclusion and collaboration each March.

What are Developmental Disabilities?

Developmental disabilities are a group of conditions due to an impairment in physical, learning, language, and/or behavior areas. Many of these conditions begin before birth and are typically lifelong diagnoses. However, in some cases, a developmental disability can happen later due to injury, infection, or other causes.

A complex mix of factors are believed to cause developmental disabilities, including genetics, parental health and behaviors during pregnancy, or complications during birth, among other possible factors. The specific cause is often unknown.

Developmental disabilities may be more common than people realize. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 17% of children in the United States between the ages of three and 17 have one or more developmental disabilities or delays. More than five million Americans reportedly have developmental disabilities.

Examples of developmental disabilities include:

- attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder
- autism spectrum disorder
- cerebral palsy
- hearing loss
- intellectual disabilities
- language and speech disorders
- learning disorders
- muscular dystrophy
- vision impairment

When children are significantly delayed in cognitive and physical development, their conditions may be categorized as global developmental delays.

Living with developmental disabilities can create a variety of challenges, depending on the specific conditions. For example, people may have difficulties with mobility, communication, self-help, and independent living.

Additionally, people with developmental disabilities may experience physical and mental health issues, and they are vulnerable to abuse and neglect on many levels, including physical, psychological, legal, and systemic abuse. Societal attitudes, both historically and presently, also impact people with developmental disabilities.

How Can Easterseals Help?

At Easterseals, we support individuals with developmental disabilities and their families every day. Our services enhance the lives of those with disabilities by helping them develop skills to achieve greater independence. Clients may be referred for services to assist with walking, sitting, dressing, talking, writing, or other activities of daily living.

Our services include physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R), outpatient pediatric therapy (occupational, physical, and speech), early intervention and child development through West Virginia Birth to Three, and autism services, including applied behavior analysis through a partnership with Kendall Behavioral Solutions and autism spectrum disorder evaluations.

Prior to seeking services, parents and pediatricians should engage in developmental monitoring and make note of any delays or concerns with a child's growth and development. Children reach milestones at their own pace, but there are guidelines for when skills typically develop, particularly between birth and age five.

Easterseals offers a developmental milestones brochure to help track a child's progress as well as a confidential online screening tool that can alert families to potential delays to discuss with a healthcare provider. A milestone is a skill that a majority of children are able to demonstrate by a certain age. Examples include sitting with support by six months, saying 8-10 words by 15 months, and matching shapes and colors by 30 months.

If these milestones are not being met, follow the mantra of early intervention specialists: "Don't wait; evaluate." The CDC reports that early identification and intervention can have a significant impact on a child's ability to learn new skills and reduce the need for costly interventions over time.

Families can request a doctor's referral to Easterseals or make their own referral for West Virginia Birth to Three services.