

National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET)

THE PRACTICAL TEACHER

This Month's Topic:

Multiple Disabilities in Your Classroom: 10 Tips for Teachers

More than 132,000 students with multiple disabilities receive special education and related services in our public schools. Is there a child with multiple disabilities in your class? He or she clearly has special learning needs, so how is teaching this student different than teaching a student with just one disability? How can you address the student's learning needs in positive and effective ways that will help the student learn?

What are Multiple Disabilities?

We all know students who have more than one disability, but few of them are considered to have *multiple* disabilities. Why is that? How is having *multiple disabilities* different from having more than one disability? Answer — When a student's disabilities cause such severe educational needs that they cannot be accommodated in a special education program solely for one of the impairments, the student is considered to have multiple disabilities.

What's the "official" definition? The nation's special education law, IDEA, defines the term multiple disabilities as follows.

Multiple disabilities...

...means concomitant [simultaneous] impairments (such as intellectual disability-blindness, intellectual disability-orthopedic impairment, etc.), the combination of which causes such severe educational needs that they cannot be accommodated in a special education program solely for one of the impairments. The term does not include deaf-blindness.

There's more to IDEA's definition of multiple disabilities than having more than one impairment or disability. The *combination* of disabilities causes the student to have severe educational needs that cannot be addressed by providing special education services for only one of the impairments.

What level of educational need is considered "severe enough" to make a student with multiple disabilities eligible for special education? Each state defines this for itself, so it's important to know your state's definition of multiple disabilities. It's also important to know:

- how *each* disability affects the child's learning and functioning, and
- how the *combination* of disabilities does as well.

What Kinds of Support do Children with Multiple Disabilities Need?

Most children with multiple disabilities will need some level of help and support throughout their lives. How much support a child needs will depend on the disabilities involved? A child with mild multiple disabilities may only need support every now and again, or for particular tasks. Children with multiple, more severe disabilities are likely to need ongoing support with activities such as:

- walking, standing, lifting, and bending;
- speaking and communicating;
- concentrating and thinking;
- working.
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The student's IEP team should identify which major life activities are a challenge for the student because of his or her disabilities.

Practical Tips for Teachers

How do you address the learning needs of your students with multiple disabilities? Here are some tips that you can use right away in your classroom.

1. **Tap into the student's strengths.** Each student with multiple disabilities has his or her own set of skills, strengths, and learning needs, which are documented in the IEP (always start with the IEP!). So, it's a good idea to find out more about the student's strengths and interests. Parents are a great source of this information, so is the student!
2. **Be ready to make modifications.** The right modifications and accommodations in the classroom can help a student with multiple disabilities access the general education curriculum at a grade-appropriate level. Find out about Supports, Modifications, and Accommodations for Students at: <http://nichcy.org/schoolage/accommodations>
3. **Ask for the program supports or modifications you need to be included in the IEP.** The student's IEP can include Program Modifications for School Personnel. Read about this at: <http://nichcy.org/schoolage/iep/iepccontents/modifications-personnel>
4. **Partial participation can make the difference.** Partial participation means making modifications to the task so that a student with multiple disabilities isn't excluded from activities. Even if the student isn't able to complete a task fully or independently, he or she can still participate and benefit from the learning taking place.
5. **Learn about assistive technology (AT).** AT is often the key to inclusion for many students with multiple disabilities. Computers, augmentative/alternative communication systems, and communication boards are just some examples of helpful AT. Visit the *Center on Technology and Disability* to learn more about which AT devices may be useful for your student:
6. **Learn about accessible textbooks.** The law requires that schools provide students with print disabilities with accessible instructional materials. If your student has difficulties using print materials, visit the *National AIM Center* to learn where and how to get textbooks and workbooks that your student will be able to use: <http://aim.cast.org/>

7. **Don't give up on a goal; practice and reinforce.** If your student's disabilities affect his or her intellectual functioning, he or she will be slower to learn new things and will have difficulty applying that learning in new situations. Do not, however, assume that a student who is having difficulty cannot achieve a goal. Plan more hands-on opportunities for learning and practice, give feedback immediately, and repeat the learning task in different settings.
8. **Deal with behavior issues.** Disabilities often affect a student's behavior, and a combination of disabilities can be especially disruptive. If the student's behavior is affecting his or her learning or the learning of others, find effective strategies in our *Behavior Suite*:
<http://nichcy.org/schoolage/behavior>
9. **Make the most of paraprofessionals.** Some students with multiple disabilities will require the support of an aide or paraprofessional. Learn effective strategies for working with paraprofessionals on our Paraprofessionals page:
<http://nichcy.org/schools-administrators/paras>
10. **Be involved in the student's transition planning.** IDEA requires that IEP teams and students plan ahead for the student's transition from school to the adult world. This is especially crucial for a student who has multiple disabilities. When the time comes for the student to begin planning, have a look at our Transition Suite:
<http://nichcy.org/schoolage/transitionadult>

Learn more about supporting students with multiple disabilities

For more details about the information presented here, plus tips for parents, helpful organizations, and more, visit our fact sheet on Multiple Disabilities at:
<http://nichcy.org/disability/specific/multiple>.