



# POSITION STATEMENT

ADOPTED: DECEMBER 2005  
FIELD REVIEW: OCTOBER 2005

## Developmental Delay as an Eligibility Category

DEC believes in the uniqueness of the young child and that services and interventions must be responsive to the young child's needs and patterns of development. We believe that the disability categories used for older school-aged children are often inappropriate for young children birth through eight years and that the category of developmental delay can be a more appropriate designation of disability for special education eligibility. We believe that the assessment of disabilities in young children requires consideration of the whole child through the use of multiple sources, informants, settings and measures.

As defined by DEC in 1991, developmental delay is:

*a condition which represents a significant delay in the process of development. It does not refer to a condition in which a child is slightly or momentarily lagging in development. The presence of developmental delay is an indication that the process of development is significantly affected and that without special intervention, it is likely that educational performance at school age will be affected (DEC, 1991, p. 1).*

Parent and professional members of DEC believe that a developmental delay category of eligibility should be available from birth through age eight. Though DEC recommends that the category of developmental delay be applied to the period from birth through age eight, we do not disagree with the provision in IDEA 1997 permitting its use for birth through age nine. We believe that the requirement to identify children by traditional disability categories in the early years might result in a premature categorization or miscategorization of children and consequently inappropriate services. Furthermore, the use of the developmental delay category allows for the identification of children with disabilities at younger ages who otherwise might go unserved because of the difficulties in applying traditional disability categories to young children. However, there can be sound reasons for identifying some specific disabilities. This issue is of particular importance for children with multiple or significant disabilities for whom being identified

as developmentally delayed may result in the loss of services, authorization of inappropriate services, or loss of access to adequate or appropriate funding resources. Therefore, the use of a developmental delay category does not preclude the use of appropriate disability categories (e.g., visually impaired, deaf-blind).

Including the developmental delay category as an option from birth through age eight is supported by a number of considerations. First, the period of development typically characterized as early childhood is birth through age eight, a period of development considered to be unique by both the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and DEC. Development in young children is characterized by a broad range of behaviors across developmental domains and is better described by developmental metrics than by those with a more educational or academic focus. Second, using standardized and norm-referenced assessments to identify diagnostic categories for young children continues to result in the incorrect categorization of some children. The psychometric integrity of instruments typically used to classify students for categorical services is only slightly greater for children ages six, seven, and eight than for their younger peers. Third, for many children, the early grades are a crucial foundation for acculturation within the school community. Many children are transient or enter school at kindergarten or beyond. For these children, opportunities to understand and practice school behaviors are limited. Categorical classification during these years would be premature and potentially inaccurate. Fourth, informed team decisions utilizing professional judgments and family input should contribute to eligibility determinations.

### Division for Early Childhood

27 Fort Missoula Road • Missoula, MT 59804 • Phone: 406.543.0872 • Fax: 406.543.0887

E-mail: [dec@dec-sped.org](mailto:dec@dec-sped.org) • [www.dec-sped.org](http://www.dec-sped.org)



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Finally, the special education services that children receive have historically been determined by their disability category. Using a developmental delay category for the full span of the early childhood years facilitates a broader, whole-child perspective for intervention. This perspective can focus on the child's needs and the identification of services to meet those needs in developmentally appropriate ways.

DEC is aware of state and local discretion available under IDEA regarding the use of developmental delay as an eligibility category for children ages three through nine. DEC strongly recommends that state and local agencies develop and consistently implement the use of a developmental delay category as an option to insure appropriate services and smooth transitions for children with disabilities and their families during the early childhood period of development. To this end, DEC encourages the use of the category within states and by local school districts. DEC also encourages states to consider the use of a single or aligned state definition of developmental delay for pre-school children served under Section 619 of Part B and for infants and toddlers served under Part C of IDEA.

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