How Brain Injury is Different from Other Disabilities

Students with brain injury face different challenges than students with other disabilities. It's important to understand those difference when working with students with TBI.

Brain injuries can affect many abilities needed to function well at school. Sometimes you can observe the signs of brain injury, such as problems with balance or vision. Other symptoms are invisible, such as problems controlling reactions, but all symptoms are real and interfere with learning. Students who have had a brain injury can have day-to-day variability in skills, stamina, emotional regulation, and memory. Some students experience many symptoms, whereas others have only a few. Every brain injury is different.

Brain injury is invisible, making it difficult to understand. If a student enters your classroom with a broken bone or other physical injury, you have a constant reminder that the student has sustained injuries and might need accommodations or assistance throughout the school day. However, after a TBI, a student might appear unchanged, which makes it easy to assume that they have made a full recovery and will function at the same level as before the injury.

Brain injury affects classroom success, potentially long-term. Most students make academic gains after injury, but those with moderate to severe injury tend to see their rate of improvement slow progressively over time. It is important to conduct ongoing assessments to ensure the student is mastering skills.

Following brain injury, students often have problems with executive function — attention, planning, goal setting, problem-solving, cognitive flexibility, and abstract reasoning. These challenges result from direct damage to the frontal regions of the brain or from disruption of connections among these and other brain regions.

© 2023 University of Oregon. Use for personal educational purposes only. No further copying or distribution is allowed.

Problems with executive function can affect most aspects of school performance and can include:

- Difficulty concentrating
- Problems with organizing materials
- Difficulty shifting attention from one task to another
- Difficulty getting started on a task (initiation)
- Trouble with assignments that have multiple steps
- Frustration or anger under normal or typical circumstances.

© 2023 University of Oregon. Use for personal educational purposes only. No further copying or distribution is allowed.