

## ***WHAT IS A DISABILITY ?***

Disability is a multidimensional concept, relating to the body functions of people, the life activities in which people participate and the factors in their environment that limit their capacity to participate. Often disabilities are grouped as intellectual/learning, psychiatric, sensory/speech and physical/diverse (the last including acquired brain injury).<sup>1</sup>

The definition of disability has shifted over the past two or three decades. It used to be defined purely in medical terms as a health condition. This approach located 'the problem of disability' in the person with a disability and 'the solution' in treating the person with a disability. Now, disability is more often recognised as the interaction between a person and his or her environment, including the social, economic, legal and built environment. The greatest barriers faced by people with disabilities are a product of this interaction and often the solution to those barriers lies in changing that environment.

According to the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF), endorsed by WHO<sup>2</sup> and used in Australia, 'disability' is an umbrella term for any or all of the components: impairment, activity limitation and participation restriction, as influenced by environmental factors.<sup>3</sup>

- *Impairments* are 'problems in body function or structure such as significant deviation or loss'.
- *Activity limitations* are 'difficulties an individual may have in executing activities' (core activities are defined as self-care, mobility and communication).
- *Participation restrictions* are 'problems an individual may experience in involvement in life situations' (school, employment).
- *Environmental factors* 'make up the physical, social and attitudinal environment in which people live and conduct their lives'.

### **A person's core activity restriction may be:**

- Profound – unable to perform a core activity or always needing assistance
- Severe – sometimes needing assistance to perform a core activity
- Moderate – not needing assistance, but having difficulty performing a core activity
- Mild – having no difficulty performing a core activity but using aids or equipment because of disability<sup>4</sup>

Related Fact Sheets: ***Children with a Disability***

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<sup>1</sup> AIHW, 'Australia's Welfare 2003', p.342

<sup>2</sup> World Health Organisation Assembly, May 2001

<sup>3</sup> AIHW 'Disability, Prevalence and Trends', December 2003 (Summary)

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

### **About National Disability Services**

National Disability Services is the national industry association for disability services, representing over 650 not-for-profit organisations. Collectively, our members operate several thousand services for Australians with all types of disability. NDS's members range in size from small support groups to large multi-service organisations, and are located in every State and Territory across Australia.

NDS defines its purpose under two broad categories. Firstly, it works to increase the capacity of its members to operate efficiently and effectively through provision of information, networking opportunities, and corporate partnerships. Secondly, NDS exists to make the voices of people with disabilities and their service providers heard by governments at both state/territory and federal levels. By so doing, NDS influences public policy to deliver outcomes that are responsive to the needs of people with disabilities and their providers.

NDS has a National Secretariat in Canberra and offices in every State and Territory.

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