

Introduction to Teaching Students With Medical, Physical, and Multiple Disabilities

"I can't believe I won the scholarship. I mean I thought the story I wrote was good, but not that good." **Martin** is a 17-year-old high school junior. He has cerebral palsy, a condition that restricts his speech and coordination. He uses crutches to get around school, but requires very little assistance during the school day. All of his instruction is provided in classes with his neighbors and peers. A special education teacher supports Martin's teachers whenever they request help. Martin uses a computer to communicate with his teachers and peers.



"For years we went to the same school, and it wasn't easy being the younger sister of the only person in the school with a disability. Everybody knew me as, Bonnie, Mavis's sister. I thought I had to protect her, and when she told me she wanted to take care of herself, life got a lot easier." Because **Mavis** was born without feet, getting around is not easy for her. Although Bonnie wishes her family could do more physical activities together, she realizes it probably wouldn't happen even if Mavis didn't have a disability. After all, regardless of physical characteristics, family members don't always share common interests. And disabilities don't have to control a person's life.

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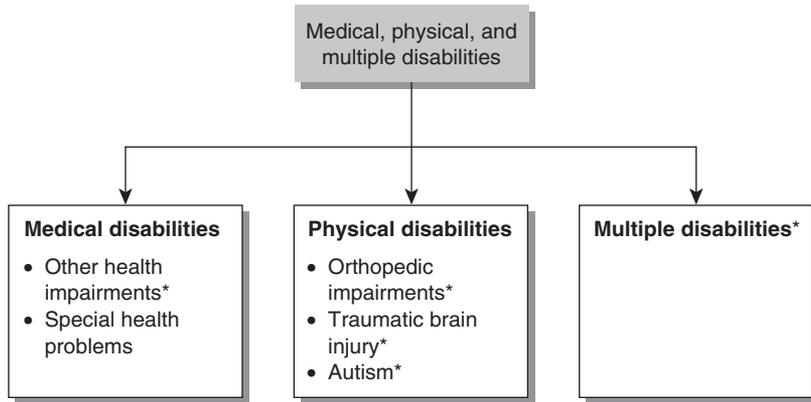
“A lot of people would back away from me on the street. They would actually run away from me. People who associated with me were not treated much better.” **Ryan** did not look different from the other boys in his class. He didn’t act much differently either. But Ryan’s medical condition was unlike anything his peers ever experienced. Ryan had hemophilia; his body lacked a substance needed to make his blood clot. If he was cut or even bruised, the bleeding was very difficult to stop. Ryan took injections of the clotting substance to help him live a normal life. Unfortunately, Ryan contracted the AIDS virus from the injections. The virus caused serious problems, beyond the obvious, for Ryan and his family.



“I can’t tell you how much being friends with Leslie has enriched our daughter’s life. She truly is an exceptional child.” **Leslie** has a visual impairment, a hearing impairment, and physical impairments that make moving around school more of a challenge than a freedom. Leslie’s friend Karin lives in her neighborhood and has known Leslie all her life. Sometimes Karin wonders about Leslie’s disabilities, but most of the time she is too busy playing with Leslie to worry about it.

Students with specific learning disabilities, speech or language impairments, mental retardation, emotional disturbance, deafness and hearing impairments, and visual impairments as well as those who are deaf and blind account for about 95 percent of all students with disabilities in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Five additional categories represent the remaining students who receive special education under federally supported programs: multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairments, other health impairments, autism, and traumatic brain injury. In this book, these categories are organized into three groups:

Figure I.1 Relationship of Medical, Physical, and Multiple Disabilities to Federal Disability Categories



*Categories recognized by federal government

Medical disabilities

Physical disabilities

Multiple disabilities

In the medical disabilities section, we discuss the federal category of “other health impairments” as well as special health problems for which no current special education category exists.

In the physical disabilities section, we discuss orthopedic impairments, autism and other neurological disorders that have physical effects, and traumatic brain injury. Because multiple disabilities is a federal category, we discuss it separately. The way in which we have grouped multiple disabilities is based on what we believe are the central causes and/or primary characteristics of the disabilities. The organization of these topics is presented in *Figure I.1*.

Almost 582,000 students (ages 6–21) with medical, physical, or multiple disabilities received special education services (see *Table I.1*). These students represent about 10 percent of all students with disabilities and about 1 percent of the school-aged population. Their special education needs vary from supportive

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Table I.1 Distribution of Students with Medical, Physical, or Multiple Disabilities in the United States

<i>Category</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage of All Students With Disabilities</i>
Multiple disabilities	122,559	2.1
Other health impairments	291,850	5.0
Orthopedic impairments	73,057	1.3
Autism	78,749	1.4
Traumatic brain injury	14,844	0.3
Combined	581,059	10.1
Disabilities in other categories	5,194,663	89.9
All disabilities	5,775,722	100.0

Source: U.S. Department of Education (2002), Table AA2.

consultation provided by related services personnel to very specific assistance related to medical conditions.

Despite low prevalence, there has been heightened interest in medical, physical, and multiple disabilities over the past few years, and heightened activity in the fields of medicine and education to prevent and treat them. Improved medical care has increased the longevity of those with serious illness, adding to the visibility of their conditions. Also, the work of parents and advocacy groups has been especially intense on behalf of those with these low-prevalence conditions.

The same legal and legislative initiatives that have had an impact on the delivery of services to those with higher-prevalence conditions have affected the education and treatment of those with medical, physical, and multiple disabilities. And those initiatives have brought these students into general education settings, increasing their visibility and public interest in their conditions. Finally, the high cost of educating and treating these students has policymakers and educators examining programs and services.