

The term *cretin* applied to people with intellectual disabilities and stunted growth. It is based on the word *Christian*, with the purpose of emphasizing that despite physical or mental disabilities, they were nevertheless human beings. The word was adopted as a clinical term for someone suffering from dwarfism and mental retardation as a result of a congenital thyroid deficiency. It has since become synonymous with "fool."

Wealthier parents tended to keep their children with developmental disabilities at home. In the more rural areas, persons with developmental disabilities were often a normal part of the community.

*"There are two ways of spreading light – to be the candle or the mirror that reflects it."*  
– Edith Wharton



In 1842, Johann Jakob Guggenbuhl, a young doctor, was "stirred by the sight of a dwarfed, crippled cretin of stupid appearance mumbling the Lord's Prayer at a wayside cross." Guggenbuhl believed that his students could be cured through proper health programming and training, and opened a training school in Switzerland, called the Abdenberg, 4,000 feet above sea level on a mountain summit. (It was believed lower altitudes somehow contributed to cretinism.) For a while, the school was a tremendous success. But as Guggenbuhl traveled frequently abroad for long periods, and as the school became increasingly crowded, visitors discovered neglect and abuse, and the school was closed. While Guggenbuhl's school proved a failure, his early success with education influenced and inspired educators and reformers in the United States.

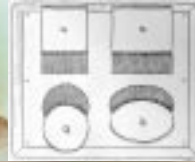


Persons who lived in extreme poverty, including many with physical or mental disabilities, were often put into poorhouses or almshouses. Such establishments, supported by public funds, began in the Middle Ages as a means of removing economic outcasts from society.



Social Reformer Dorothea Dix advocated for better services for persons with mental illness and other disabilities. As she traveled across the country visiting jails, almshouses, poorhouses, and asylums, Dix spoke to many state legislatures, pleading with them to improve the conditions for "the wards of the nation." Through her passionate appeals, and with only the best intentions for persons with disabilities, Dix helped prepare the way for public institutions.

Some poorhouses were still in use until World War II.



Another young and influential doctor was Edward Seguin (1812-1880), considered the first great teacher in the field of developmental disabilities. He believed that mental deficiency was caused by a weakness of the nervous system, and could be cured through a process of motor and sensory training. By developing the muscles and senses, Seguin believed his pupils – regardless of their level of mental retardation – would obtain more control over their central nervous systems, thus allowing them to have more control over their wills. Many of Seguin's concepts are still used today, including positive reinforcement and modeling.

## SOCIAL REFORM AND NEW IDEAS IN EDUCATION OFFER OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEOPLE WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES.

In the United States, Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe (1801-1876), then the director of the Perkins School for the Blind, established the Massachusetts School for Idiotic and Feeble-Minded Youth in 1848, an experimental boarding school in South Boston for youth with mental retardation. Howe's wife, Julia Ward Howe, was also a reformer, and is famous for writing *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*.

Many believed phrenology – the practice of studying the shape of the skull to determine human characteristics and functions – offered the only hope of understanding developmental disabilities. Phrenologists went on to say that moral, personality, and intellectual characteristics are also determined by the shape of the skull, which determines the shape of the brain. Once a highly respected "science," phrenology was discredited as scientists found no relationship between the size and shape of the cranium and the degree of intelligence.

At the age of 19 months, Helen Keller lost her sight and hearing through an illness. With the help of teacher Anne Sullivan, she learned to speak, read, and write and graduated from Radcliffe College in 1904. She lectured across the globe and raised money for education of many people with disabilities. Helen was also a member of the Socialist Party who tried to discuss disability in the broader terms of poverty and social inequity.



Training schools were considered an educational success, offering hope to many families of children with developmental disabilities. Across the country, parents wrote to state officials and school superintendents, seeking admission for their sons and daughters. Some parents sought an education for their child; others simply needed relief.



*"Nowhere is wisdom more necessary than in the guidance of charitable impulses. Meaning well is only half our duty; Thinking right is the other, and equally important, half."*

–Samuel Gridley Howe, 1868, at the dedication in Batavia, New York of an institution to serve people with disabilities.

**STEREOTYPE:** Persons with disabilities as objects of pity: seen as suffering from some condition beyond their control, and therefore not considered accountable for their behavior; viewed with a "there but for the grace of God go I" attitude; paternalism and low growth expectations are typical consequences of this viewpoint.

**1837**  
Panic of 1837 – Over 600 banks fail by the end of the year.

**1840**  
Edward Seguin is appointed head teacher of a class of idiot children at the Salpêtrière in Paris, France. At this time he starts a private school in his home.

**1842**  
A school for idiots opens in the Bicetre with Edward Seguin as a teacher.

**1843**  
Edward Seguin is fired from Bicetre, accused of "abominable" practices.

**1847**  
Thomas S. Kirkbride publishes *On the Construction, Organization, and General Arrangements of Hospitals for the Insane*.

**1848**  
Dorothea Dix appeals to the 30th Congress for federal funding of state facilities for persons with mental illness, mental retardation, and epilepsy.

**1838**  
The Ohio Lunatic Asylum in Columbus admits its first patients from the Commercial Hospital and Lunatic Asylum of Cincinnati.

**1841**  
Dorothea Dix advocates to place persons with mental illness in hospitals for treatment.

**1842**  
P.T. Barnum opens the American Museum in New York and exhibits "Freaks."

**1846**  
E. F. Backus in New York introduces the 1st legislation to provide for separate treatment for the feeble-minded.

Samuel Gridley Howe admits first idiot pupil to his school in South Boston.

Hervey B. Wilbur opens a private school for idiots in Barre, Massachusetts.