

Frequently Asked Questions

General information on cerebral palsy can be obtained from the **What is Cerebral Palsy?** fact sheet.

Are there any other difficulties the child might have?

■ Learning difficulties

Children with cerebral palsy may experience specific learning difficulties. These may include a short attention span, motor planning difficulties (organisation and sequencing), perceptual difficulties and language difficulties. For more information, see the **Learning issues** fact sheet.

■ Intellectual difficulties

People with cerebral palsy vary widely in their intellectual capabilities. Some will show the same abilities as other people, despite their physical difficulties. Others will have some degree of intellectual disability, ranging from mild to significant.

Speech that is difficult to understand, saliva loss or the movements of children with cerebral palsy, may give the mistaken impression of an intellectual impairment.

■ Perceptual difficulties

Perception is the making sense of information gained from the senses. This enables children to do things such as move around obstacles, judge size and shape of objects and understand how lines are connected to form letters. For those who experience these difficulties, their problems may not become apparent until school or preschool.

■ Communication/language difficulties

Children with cerebral palsy may have difficulties with understanding and expressing ideas. They may require support to follow instructions, construct sentences, give specific information or tell stories that make sense. If a child is having any of these difficulties, it may have an effect on learning.

■ Speech difficulties

Because the muscles of the mouth may be affected, some children may find talking difficult. For those with restricted speech, an alternative communication system may assist them (for example communication board, book or electronic device).

Speech that is difficult to understand is not necessarily an indication of intellectual impairment.

■ Eating and drinking difficulties

Cerebral palsy may affect the muscles that open and close the mouth and move the lips and the tongue. Some children may show difficulties in chewing and swallowing food and drink. For more information, see the **Mealtimes** fact sheet.

■ Saliva loss

Due to poor muscle control some children with cerebral palsy may have varying degrees of saliva loss (dribbling). The dribbling may be more noticeable when they are concentrating on a fine motor task.

■ Sensation

Loss of feeling (touch) may affect some children with cerebral palsy in their performance of both fine and gross motor tasks. This will depend on the degree of involvement of the limbs. This loss of feeling is often linked with a lack of awareness of their limbs and the child may need encouragement to use the limbs that are affected.

■ Vision

Some children may have visual impairments. One of these may be:

Strabismus (also known as 'turned eye' or 'squint') - One or both eyes are turned in or out and are prevented from working together. This may lead to double vision or focussing with one eye at a time.

■ Hearing

Some children with cerebral palsy may have a hearing loss.

■ Epilepsy

If this problem is present, the doctor may aim to control the seizures by choosing medicine that suits the child. It may be necessary to change the medication several times before the seizures are controlled. Sometimes they cannot be controlled.

Will the child's condition change?

Cerebral palsy is a permanent condition. Children with cerebral palsy live with it all their lives. However, all children develop and learn as they grow and intervention can minimise the effect of the disability on their everyday life and encourage the child to reach their potential. It cannot however, cure cerebral palsy.

The damage to the brain early in life does not increase. However as with all children, children with cerebral palsy may have periods where progress appears to come to a standstill. This may be due to;

- **Increased expectations of children as they grow older**
For a child with cerebral palsy, simple tasks may require more practice to achieve, e.g. dressing and eating independently may be achieved at a later stage than peers.
- **Illness**
- **Stress** (e.g. changes such as moving home, a new baby)
- **Epilepsy**
- **A sudden spurt in one developmental area**

Will the child learn to walk?

It is often not possible to be sure until the child has been observed by the paediatrician and therapists for some months or even years. Many children with mild and moderate degrees of cerebral palsy do learn to walk.

Will the child learn to talk?

Most children with cerebral palsy learn to talk. Some children will not, and others will have some speech, but it may be difficult to understand them. Some children who do not talk may have the skills to use augmentative/alternative communication such as a communication board (with pictures or symbols), signing or an electronic device that has a voice.

Will the child be able to look after him or herself?

The aim of early childhood intervention is to encourage the child to develop his/her self-help skills (eg toileting, eating) as much as possible. Some children who have mild cerebral palsy will have no problems with this. For others, it will be a slow process. In some with severe difficulties, considerable assistance from others will always be needed.

It is important to encourage and allow the child to do as much as possible for him or herself.

Will the child have difficulties with behaviour?

Cerebral palsy is a physical condition and is not strongly associated with particular behaviour problems. As with other areas, there are individual differences in the way children behave and learn to cope with the day-to-day demands in their lives. Children who do show behaviour difficulties need to be managed in the same way as their peers.

If the child also has an intellectual disability, you might make some allowances as you would for a younger child. However, the child should still be helped to function as a member of the group.

Will the child have a normal life expectancy?

Most children with cerebral palsy are healthy, and can expect a normal life span.

How important is the role of preschool/child care?

Whatever the skills or needs of the individual child with cerebral palsy, the childcare centre provides many learning opportunities. The most important learning is that which will prepare the child to cope at school and in the wider community.

Early childhood centres provide ideal opportunities for children to develop social communication and self-help skills. These are the skills all children, including those with disabilities, will need to become competent and confident in future social contexts.

Children with cerebral palsy may learn to do things in the childcare setting, which they have never done elsewhere. Copying other children and trying to conform to behavioural expectations of the whole group can greatly enhance a child's skills. Wanting to be like other children is a powerful motivator which may not be available at home or in therapy sessions.

What can the childcare/preschool do to help?

The preschool / childcare centre can enhance a child's development by:

- Remembering a child with cerebral palsy is very much like any other child. The child gets the same enjoyment as other children from play.
- Focussing on what a child can do and the ways in which the child's capabilities can be developed to his/her maximum potential.
- Allowing the child the opportunity to participate in all aspects of the program.
- Remaining optimistic yet realistic about the child's progress.
- Working closely with parents and early childhood intervention professionals to help the child maximise his/her potential.

What is early childhood intervention?

Early Childhood Intervention provides support for infants and young children who have developmental delays or disabilities, their families and communities, in order to promote the child's development and inclusion.

At the Spastic Centre we work to provide a family centred service which meets the particular needs of each child with cerebral palsy and his/her family. Our programs usually involve the parents and caregivers coming to a session where ideas are discussed to incorporate into play and everyday routines at home or in the community. This means children are receiving more opportunities for learning and developing their skills than just in therapy sessions.

Who delivers early childhood intervention services?

Early Childhood Intervention services are offered by a range of personnel including, special education teachers, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, speech pathologists, psychologists, social workers, medical officers, nurses, orthoptists, audiologists and others depending on the needs of the child.

The Spastic Centre offers a range of services to children with cerebral palsy.

**Each child with cerebral palsy has individual needs.
In partnership with the child and their family,
The Spastic Centre team can advise on their needs.**