



How to promote independence and develop important life skills in your child with a disability

Children with physical disabilities are no different from other children. They have the same behaviours, the same ambitions, dreams and wishes, and the same challenges. But they also have extra challenges because their bodies don't work the same way as other kids'. Here are some practical ways that families can help. The aim is to support them in as much as possible to develop **independence, responsibility and important life skills.**

These tips are based on evidence from extensive research on young people with and without physical disabilities.



Enable your child to become as independent as possible

- All children become more independent during their high school years. Yours may have to learn extra skills to do this. Give them plenty of opportunities to learn to move around independently. Consider a powered wheelchair or scooter. This can also enhance their social skills and confidence, and give them more energy to devote to school.
- Don't jump in quickly and help your child. Let your child decide how much help they need. Encourage them to learn to do things themselves. It will take longer, but it's worth it because they will learn skills that they will need when they get older.
- Always give your child credit for their achievements, but never under-estimate what they can do!

Give your child opportunities to learn domestic skills

- As far as possible, set similar expectations for your child with a disability and their siblings, so that they learn to do chores around the house as much as they can.
- Encourage teamwork among siblings, so that they learn to work together to get the job done. Share the workload and rotate siblings between physical and non-physical chores. Even if your child with a disability cannot physically complete the chore all alone, they will learn how to plan tasks, ask for help, and give directions – all useful skills in later life!
- Think outside the box! Just because your child can't do things in the conventional way, doesn't mean they can't do it at all. Ask your therapist about equipment and aids that might enable your child to do more tasks around the home.
- Children with physical disabilities can often do the same tasks as other children, but it takes longer. Give them enough time for them to complete tasks. Don't complete the tasks for your child.

Adapt your child's study environment

- Make sure that their desk is set up so that they can work there effectively, and that the items they use regularly are all within reach.
- Ask your therapists about adapted equipment and aids. These may include writing aids and modified computer programs.

Adapt your child's wider environment

- Talk to your child's therapists about the design layout of the home. Many home modifications are available for people with disabilities, such as lowering kitchen bench tops, changing tap levers, installing self opening doors. These will encourage your child to be independent and not to rely on others to do everything for them.
- Establish links with your local area coordinator and local council so that you can have input into the layout and designs of parks and recreation facilities in your neighbourhood.
- Be actively involved in your child's school community. Your willingness to be involved can foster goodwill. You can help teachers and children to understand your child better and work together with them to improve supports for children with disabilities at school.

Help your child to develop good social skills

- Spend time together doing leisure activities. Time spent with the family is important. That's how your child will learn how to get on with others. When they go out to the broader community, they will be better at interacting with other people.
- Teach your child how to share, help others and cooperate with others. These skills will help them get along better with their peers.
- Children with disabilities don't get as many opportunities to learn social behaviours as their peers, but they also have to deal with more bullying. Teach them how to manage their own emotions and understand the intentions of others by observing their facial expressions and body language. This will help them to cope better in social situations.

Find out what activities are available

- Liaise with your local area coordinator to find out what activities are locally available and which community groups support participation of children and youth with physical disabilities. Often these groups are open to including people with disabilities in their programmes and will welcome you to join in.

Plan activities beforehand

- Transport to activities in the community can sometimes be difficult. Work out a sustainable arrangement so that your child with a physical disability can reliably access the activity rather than depending on transport availability.
- Plan ahead of time for activities and events that your child with a physical disability would like to do.
- Network with key stakeholders in the child's life, and work together to organise fundraising activities in order to support these activities. Schools are a good place to start.

Plan major events in your child's life beforehand

- Plan early for your child's transition to high school. Speak to your child's therapists and school staff in deciding which school option would best cater for your child's specific needs.
- Plan for your child's transition out of high school. Speak to your child's therapists, school staff and your local area coordinator.
- Speak to other families who have children with similar challenges. Share and learn from one another's experiences.

Where can I get help?

Your child's therapists

The Independent Living Centre

<http://www.ilc.com.au>

Your Local Area Coordinator

<http://www.disability.wa.gov.au/forindividuals/lacd.html>

Websites

Disability Infolink
http://www.tccp.com.au/disability_infolink

Positive Parenting Program
<http://www1.triplep.net>

To view results from a recent Perth study on activities of young adolescents with and without physical disabilities, see:
www.tccp.com.au/docs/documents/Information%20sheet%20to%20Participants.pdf