

9. Health-related conditions – Epilepsy

Some of the learners in your Hub may have health-related conditions. The two conditions that may affect some learners in your Hub are Albinism and Epilepsy. These are very different conditions; however, in both cases a major barrier to learners' educational success is stigmatisation.

Epilepsy

The term epilepsy refers to several different conditions, where the common feature is the possible occurrence of seizures. Seizures are caused by unusual electrical and chemical changes in the brain, which can result in changes in a person's physical movement or their awareness of their surroundings.

Seizures can vary between those that last for a few seconds to those that last a few minutes, and the signs of a seizure vary with the type of epilepsy. For some learners these signs will be less noticeable and might not stand out within a busy Hub, whereas for other learners these signs are much more prominent. These signs might include:

- Brief periods of staring. These lasting only a few seconds, sometimes with rapid eye blinking.
- Involuntary twitching of an arm or leg, head nodding or flexing of the upper body. During these movements the girl will be aware of her surroundings.
- Apparent disorientation and confusion. A girl might begin unusual behaviour such as hand wringing or walking around. These episodes last a couple of minutes, during which the girl will not be aware of her surroundings.
- Feelings of panic and fear.
- Whole shaking of the body. These **convulsions** typically last for two or three minutes.
- Loss of consciousness.

Most seizures stop on their own, and do not need immediate medical treatment. If the seizure lasts more than five minutes call medical help and inform your District Coordinator or Community Mobiliser.



What can you do in your role to support girls with Epilepsy?

There are several practical things that can be done to support the successful learning of girls with epilepsy in your Hub.

Get to know the girl and discuss her condition with her and her family. This will give you an indication of the type of epilepsy she has, any medications she might be taking and when she takes them. Talk with her and your school buddy, and plan how you will respond to this girl's individual needs and any seizures should they occur.

Basic first aid in the event it occurs:

1. Keep calm.
2. Protect the girl from injury. Remove her from dangerous objects/surroundings e.g. sun, fire, water.
3. Do not force anything between her teeth or in her mouth. Instead, check for anything in her mouth to prevent choking. Do not give her anything to drink.
4. Place her on her side in the recovery position.
5. Do not restrain her movement.
6. Loosen clothing around her neck/body to enable adequate ventilation.
7. Reassure her after the seizure as she may sometime appear confused. Allow her to rest until fully recovered.
8. Call emergency medical attention when seizures continue for more than 5 minutes without her regaining consciousness.

Physical

- Epilepsy need not prevent a learner from taking part in physical activities.
- A very small number of children with epilepsy (less than 5%) have photosensitive epilepsy, where seizures are triggered by flickering/flashing lights and contrasting patterns. Your initial discussion with the girl and her family will identify if this is the case. Ask her about 'triggers' which affect her, for example, sunlight through blinds or stress, and plan to deal with it. This can involve sitting the girl in a particular place or reducing any computer/phone screen activities.
- Medication should be given outside of Hub time. If the learner requires specific emergency medication, then discuss this with your school buddy and District Coordinator who will develop guidance with you.
- Some learners may injure themselves during a seizure and so be prepared to give appropriate first aid.
- After a seizure the girl may need a little time to recover. Having a quiet place to sit, with a suitable person such as a responsible adult or friend, is helpful.

Teaching/Activities

Children with epilepsy have the same variations in intelligence and ability as other learners. However, their epilepsy can create a barrier to learning. In particular their seizures (or the medications they take) can affect their memory. The learning activities that you create, and how you deliver them, can be very helpful in facilitating successful learning experiences. The following general strategies are helpful.

- Reduce anxiety.
- Teach the girl to stay calm when they get a 'memory blank'. Model accepting behaviour and do not punish their forgetfulness.
- Be prepared for their progress to fall back sometimes. Learners with epilepsy may have memory issues, difficulties with concentration and become tired during extended activities.
- Be patient and show them you understand their situation. Motivate them to persevere and reward their progress, even if small, with praise.
- Some learners with epilepsy may be slower in writing than their Hub peers. If this is the case, then differentiate written activities for them and praise progress.

Use mnemonic techniques that enhance the retention and recall of information:

- Rhymes and songs to rehearse information.
- Picture and word association.

Present materials in different modalities:

- Include physical materials, differing colours and objects in learning activities.
- Display explanatory diagrams of concepts and give visual demonstrations where possible.
- Develop activities in which the girl is actively involved, rather than a passive listener.

Check that learning is maintained:

- If a task or concept is important then give the learner repeated opportunities to demonstrate it and talk through (or comment on) what they are doing.
- Differentiate activities where appropriate and use interactive group work.

Social

- Addressing the social aspects of the girl's Hub experience is essential in supporting her successful learning.
- Other learners at the Hub are likely to have existing beliefs about epilepsy, or to pick up these beliefs through your Hub. If learners have not seen a seizure before or hold dramatic misconceptions about what it means, then they might be disturbed by it, should it occur with a girl in their Hub. You will need to respond calmly and appropriately.
- Your behaviour is vital in challenging common negative beliefs and misconceptions, and in modelling appropriate responses to epilepsy. In explaining epilepsy to learners, you need to be clear that it is something that happens due to electrical activity in the brain, that it is not caused by evil spirits and is not a disease or contagious in any way.
- Girls with epilepsy report being stigmatised and feeling uncomfortable about their condition. As a Community Educator you will need to make the girl feel welcome and safe in your Hub and accepted by their peers.

References

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