

4e. Learners with physical impairments

The term physical impairment can encompass a wide variety of situations. It might refer to a girl who is able to use only one hand, someone who uses a wheelchair to move around or a learner who has muscular and coordination difficulties. Therefore, as with the other categories we have considered, a good first step is to get to know the girl, find out about their disability and the impact that this might have on how to best support their learning.

A common type of physical impairment is Cerebral Palsy (CP), a general term for a wide range of cerebral (brain) disorders. These disorders affect how people control movement of different parts of the body – arms, legs and facial muscles. CP affects different people in different ways.

Children with CP may find it difficult, or be unable, to:

- walk
- talk clearly
- move their head or facial muscles
- see or hear as well as other children
- control their movements.

Sometimes the muscles affected are very floppy or, more usually, very tight and tense.

Sometimes CP can also result in intellectual impairment, but more often children with CP tend to be physically rather than intellectually disabled. Many children with CP have delayed progress in reading and spelling, but can have age-appropriate communication, social abilities and progress in most school subjects.





What can you do in your role to support children with a physical impairment?

The nature a girl's physical impairment, and her experience of it, her will be very individualised and can vary over time. It is therefore vital to talk to the girl, and her parents if possible, in order to understand how you may best support her learning.

However, there are some general points to consider.

Physical

- Look at the physical access around the school. For example, can the girl access the toilets and eating areas? Do they need a ramp?
- Arrange the room so that everyone can move around as easily as possible.
- Can the girl access her seating area easily?
- Is access to the toilet straightforward? Is assistance required?
- Can another adult support, e.g. in taking notes, clarifying tasks or handling materials? This can be helpful as some girls may have difficulties in using a pen, turning pages, or have involuntary movements that interfere with their reading or ability to look at objects and displays.
- Is your writing on a board at a height that is visible to them?
- Consider if the girl's table and chair allow them to carry out the activities that you have planned. Simple adjustments and adaptations, for example a writing board that is angled, can be useful.
- Adapt pencils and other tools to help them use them more easily. Some girls will benefit from using large pencils or pencils with 'grips' or a weight. These are easier to hold and control. If this is the case, then simple adaptations can be very helpful.

Social

- Girls with physical impairment are stigmatised and shunned in many areas. Therefore, you will need to attend to the social aspects of the Hub, in order to develop the girl's self-confidence and enjoyment of Hub activities.
- Think about who the girl is sat near or working with. Can this group be selected to support positive social interactions?
- Can you develop activities that demonstrate the girl's strengths?

Activities

- Do you need to differentiate an activity so that the learner can complete it successfully? For example:



- Some young people with physical impairments will need extra time to speak and become involved in activities. Check that your planned activities, and ground rules, allow this to happen.
- Fatigue is common for many girls with physical impairment. You may need to plan breaks, or a mixture of activities to address this. Some girls may find remaining in one place for extended period of time painful. Having regular 'movement breaks' can help. Other girls, for example those with back problems, may find it helpful to stand for part of the Hub activities. Getting to know the girls will help you decide and plan what to do.
- If the girl is small in height, or uses a wheelchair, where possible place yourself at their eye level when talking to them.

See also:

4b. Hearing impairment

4c. Hearing impairment

4d. Visual impairment

References:

Adapted from: UNESCO (2001) *Understanding and Responding to Children's Needs in Inclusive Classrooms*, France: UNESCO

<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001243/124394e.pdf>

National Council for Special Education (2020), *Strategies for Learning and Teaching*, Strategies for Learning and Teaching

<https://www.sess.ie/categories/physical-disabilities/cerebral-palsy/tips-learning-and-teaching>

Acknowledgements

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Extracts from *Understanding and Responding to Children's Needs in Inclusive Classrooms*: McConkey, R. et al. (2001) *Understanding and Responding to Children's Needs in Inclusive Classrooms. A Guide for Teachers*. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. © UNESCO 2001.

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<http://www.open.ac.uk/about/international-development/projects-and-programmes/gate-girls-access-education>

<https://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/course/view.php?id=2579>

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