

## **CHILDREN WITH HEAD INJURY**

Significant effects of head injury in children can often be overlooked or forgotten, for a number of reasons. Firstly, children have much greater difficulty expressing themselves, as their vocabulary is limited. It is more difficult for a seven-year-old to say, "I've got a headache", "I find I'm forgetting things", or "I can't concentrate." Secondly, because children are still growing up, developing and changing over time, it is difficult to know what to compare their abilities with. It is more difficult for a child than an adult to say, "I used to be able to do that but now I can't."

An adult has years of past experience with which to compare a skill, such as memory or concentration. It is also quite common for the residual effects of a head injury to be forgotten by parents and teachers, who may say, "But the accident was years ago. He must have recovered by now". The child is in no position to stand up and say, "I am still affected by the accident", whereas an adult would be able to recognise and articulate such an effect.

The two main problem areas for children are often behavioural self control and academic performance at school. After head injury the individual may become more impulsive, disinhibited, outspoken, restless, careless, aggressive, less in control of his behaviour, irritable or emotional. Children spend the majority of their childhood gradually learning the necessary skills to control their behaviour. A head injury can often severely affect or set back that gradual process, so the child returns to the pre-school stage of temper tantrums. It is often noted that behaviour becomes worse when the child is tired. Three possible strategies might possibly help:

1. Encourage physical activity to work off that irritability and restlessness;
2. Give the child plenty of sleep and rest; and
3. Recognise the difficulties, accept that they may be due to the injury and recognise that in these circumstances parents need to be firm from an early stage.

The question of when or whether the child should return to school is always difficult. A careful balance has to be struck between the need for the child to have contact with his peers, and being sure that the child has recovered sufficiently to be able to cope with the school environment. School represents a set of very stressful situations involving new learning and multiple demands to pay attention, remember information and to exercise self-control.

If somebody has an impaired memory, poor attention, fatigued and is mentally and physically slower than they were, they are going to have difficulties. They may have already missed a large chunk of work which needs catching up. This will further exacerbate the problem. It is not surprising that children who have had a head injury fall behind academically and find that they cannot cope.

Very often the child's behaviour deteriorates and they become labelled as 'naughty troublemakers'. This behaviour is often the only way of diverting attention away from true performance difficulties. It is important for the parent to let the school know about the injury, alert the form teacher, and try to explain about the difficulties. But, of course, there is no guarantee that they will be understood.

A gradual return to school, starting off with a couple of hours and working upwards to a full day, is also important. This allows time to increase mental and physical stamina. If a cognitive assessment by a psychologist has not already been carried out, and you are concerned, ask the school to request an assessment by an educational psychologist or clinical psychologist with knowledge of brain injury. If necessary, this information can be put together in a 'statement of educational needs' and support or a teacher's aide can be provided by the school.

### **Practical steps for teachers**

- Establish planned regular meetings between parents and school and other agencies to monitor the situation.
- Look at information about head injury. Understand more about the cognitive, emotional and behavioural problems that follow head injury.
- Consider making modifications to the pupil's timetable.
- Ensure that the pupil is paying attention when important things are said.
- Present homework tasks explicitly, checking that they are written correctly and understood.
- Allow sufficient time for task completion.
- Monitor progress more frequently and provide additional help if necessary. Give extra encouragement.
- Check and deal with bullying and teasing. Help classmates to understand what has happened.
- Make special arrangements for examinations.

Powell, T. (1994). Head Injury A Practical Guide (pp. 165-167) United Kingdom: Winslow Press Ltd