



Physical Disability

About physical disabilities

Physical disability affects a child's ability to move, or to control their body movements. Children differ in how much their movement is impacted as there are many different types and causes. This includes paralysis (inability to move one or more limbs), problems with muscle tone, reduced balance, reduced ability to make larger or gross motor movements (e.g. challenges with walking and running), and reduced ability to make smaller or more precise movements (e.g. challenges with writing and doing up shoe laces). Common causes of physical disability include acquired brain injury (e.g. after a stroke), spinal cord injury, cerebral palsy, spina bifida, loss of limbs and muscular dystrophy. Some children with physical disability will walk independently, while others will use mobility aids (e.g. ankle supports, crutches or wheelchairs).

Strengths

What might be some strengths?

- Children with physical disabilities will have a range of different strengths depending on how they are affected.
- For example, some children will have unaffected speech and thinking skills.

Where you might provide support?

- Some children may need support with movement, coordination and balance. Some might use mobility aids such as a walking frame or a wheelchair.
- Support with completing everyday tasks may be needed. They may need extra time to learn and practise new skills depending on how they are affected.
- Children may experience chronic or recurring pain. This may affect their behaviour. They may become less motivated to join in.
- Some children may have challenges with building relationships.



Evidence-based strategies

Work collaboratively

- **Work with parents.** Talk with the child and their family about the child's unique strengths, preferences, and needs. This includes areas they need extra help in and the best methods of communication.
- **Build a relationship with the support team.** There may be various health professionals involved in supporting the child. Working together can lead to a shared understanding of the child, their goals, and strengths-based strategies that are consistent across other environments like home and the community.

Provide opportunities for play and peer interactions

- **Allow time for explorative play.** Consider how the child can choose their preferred toys and materials and provide them with ample time to explore them. Consider whether some play materials need to be modified. For example, adding Velcro to toys to help the child hold them.
- **Consider using toys and games that require more than one child.** This will help children interact and communicate with other children and encourage relationship building.
- **Promote full participation in activities.** Consider how children with physical disabilities can be actively included in activities. This will allow them to learn from other children and develop shared understandings of new skills and behaviours.

Consider adjustments to communication style

- **Use multiple methods to promote learning.** This could be by using visual, verbal or hands-on learning instructions.

Make each session as structured as possible

- **Provide a schedule and routine.** Visual and verbal cues can let children know what is coming up, and how they should move from one activity to another. Check that there is plenty of time for transitions between activities for children with mobility or physical challenges.



Best practice tips

Create a safe and supportive environment

- Educators can support children's learning and participation by creating a secure and positive social environment where children can build relationships with educators and other children.

Create plenty of space for movement

- Consider whether the physical space needs to be rearranged. Check that pathways are free, wide enough, and neat so that a child can move easily and without risk of injury if they use mobility aids. If a table is used for activities, check that it has plenty of room underneath it for the child to sit comfortably and participate.

Consider the placement of materials

- Consider whether books, toys, and other materials that encourage play and learning are within reach of the child. For example, consider having bookshelves at different heights. It may also be helpful to tape down paper during craft activities to avoid slipping.

Provide plenty of opportunities to practice

- Children with physical disability may need to practise skills or behaviours multiple times. Provide plenty of time to practise. Encouraging the child to use skills learned in different tasks or with different materials can help them to learn to use that skill in other situations and settings.



Early Years Learning and Development Outcomes

Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity

- Encourage unstructured and free play so that the child can explore what they can do, as well as their likes and dislikes.
- Educators can help children express their passions and ideas through creative activities such as art and music.
- It can be helpful to limit how often an adult is situated close to the child. This might help to encourage the child's sense of belonging to the early childhood group and increase social interactions with peers.

Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world

- Consider using role playing, or other group activities.
- Both verbal prompts and demonstrations may help develop requesting and sharing skills.
- See create plenty of space for movement and consider the placement of materials.

Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing

- Educators can help create a safe and supportive environment. Using positive attitudes, body language and communication styles can make a big difference in the play and learning experiences of children.
- Consider using stories, videos, or other hand-on activities to educate the child's peers on physical disabilities if the family and child wish to. This may be helpful to facilitate positive discussions and behaviours.
- Educators can provide opportunities for the child to show how they are feeling, by encouraging active participation in pretend play.
- Consider using stories about social situations and everyday activities, to promote discussion about the child's emotions, and to show the child what to do if they need help.



Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners

- Work collaboratively to discuss the best ways to use technology and other assistive devices to support the child's mobility, communication, and learning.
- See allow time to play.
- See consider adjustments to communication style.

Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators

- Children with physical disabilities may need extra support with communication and might use pictures, gestures or technology such as tablets and speech devices. Encourage the child's peers to use the child's preferred communication method during learning activities and play.
- See Provide plenty of opportunities for peer interactions.

Other considerations

Safety

- Talk to the child's family about ways to manage injury, illness, pain and fatigue.
- Some children may not know how to tell an adult if there is an emergency, or what to do in an emergency or emergency drill. Consider making time to demonstrate and practise.

Toileting/hygiene

- Talk with a child's family or other professionals about any additional strategies or equipment (e.g. adapted toilet seat, step ladder, railings) that may be needed to support the child.

Behaviour

- Stories about social situations can highlight positive behaviours and routines in the early childhood education and care setting.
- Refer to the [ABC approach](#) for more information on how to reduce challenging behaviour by supporting the child and promoting more helpful behaviour, and our [emotions page](#) for more information about supporting a child with managing their emotions.



Transitions

- Some children may find moving from the early childhood education and care setting to another setting (i.e. another early childhood setting or primary school) challenging.
- For more information about supporting children with disabilities when transitioning to a different education setting, access AllPlay Learn's [transition page](#).

Other co-occurring conditions

- Children with physical disability may also experience [cerebral palsy](#), [communication challenges](#) and [fine and gross motor](#) challenges.
- Refer to information about these areas to help support the child.

Relevant resources

Visit our [resources page](#) for a range of resources that can help to create inclusive education environments for children with disabilities and developmental challenges. Some particularly relevant resources for children with physical disability include:

- Strengths and abilities communication checklist
- Stay play talk poster (simple)
- Stay play talk poster
- Being different poster (A3)
- AllPlay Learn Story - A day at childcare
- AllPlay Learn Story - A day at kindergarten
- AllPlay Learn Story - Making friends
- AllPlay Learn Story - Sharing