

What teachers should know about cerebral palsy

Cerebral palsy is one of the most common congenital childhood disorders. It affects muscle tone, movement, and motor skills (the ability to move in a coordinated and purposeful way). CP is usually caused by brain damage that happens before or during a child's birth, or during the first few years of life.

How CP affects each person depends on which part or parts of the brain are involved. Some people have only mild impairment, while others are severely affected. For example, brain damage can be limited, affecting only the part of the brain that controls walking, or it can be more extensive, affecting muscle control of the entire body.

Although CP doesn't get progressively worse, how it affects a person's body can change as children grow and develop.

Because bullies often target students who seem "different," health conditions like CP can put children and teens at higher risk of bullying.

Students with CP may:

- have learning disabilities, visual impairments, hearing problems, speech problems, drooling issues, and behaviour problems
- need braces, crutches, or a wheelchair to get around
- need help moving around in class or reaching things
- need assistive devices for writing and speaking
- have difficulty sitting still and have uncontrolled movements
- have difficulty with bladder and bowel control and may need to use a bathroom frequently
- have seizures
- need occupational therapy (OT), physical therapy (PT), and speech therapy during the school day

What teachers can do

Students with CP may need a little more time to travel between classes and complete activities and tasks.

- Make sure your classroom is easy to get around and free of obstacles.

Students with CP may need to miss class time for doctor visits or to see the school nurse to take medication.

- Make sure to give special consideration regarding missed instruction, assignments, and testing. In some cases, arranging for verbal responses in assignments and testing can be a good way to measure learning.

Bullying is a greater risk for disabled children than others, and it can lead to long-term harm. In the short-term it can cause a student to become even more excluded and withdrawn.

- Address bullying through education, awareness, and by acting when there are any signs that it is happening.

Sometimes parents can provide insights that teachers can't get from observing students in the classroom or that students are too shy to share.

- Communicate with parents. You can learn, for instance, if a child has been struggling to read the board from her seat in the room, or if she feels intimidated by a particular student.

1 in 4 children with CP have epilepsy and may suffer from seizures. When children have cerebral palsy and an intellectual disability, the incidence of epilepsy is higher – 48%. Seizures can affect speech, intellectual and physical functioning.

- Be prepared for possible medical emergencies by planning ahead with parents in case your students with CP need advanced assistance.

In conclusion, educators, parents, doctors, therapists, and students with CP should work together to develop and maintain the best possible treatment and education plans.

Adapted from: <https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/cp-factsheet.html>, <https://www.cerebralpalsyguidance.com/cerebral-palsy/living/teacher-tips-inclusive-classrooms/> and <https://cerebralpalsy.org.au/our-research/about-cerebral-palsy/what-is-cerebral-palsy/how-cerebral-palsy-affects-people/>