

October Brings Awareness to Physical Therapy, Learning Disabilities

Throughout the month of October, organizations around the country strive to spread awareness of two topics that are close to our hearts at Easterseals—the benefits of physical therapy and the prevalence of learning disabilities.

National Physical Therapy Month

The 2020 theme for National Physical Therapy Month focuses on the benefits of physical activity and the role physical therapists play in helping people of all ages achieve their physical activity goals and improve their quality of life. Easterseals has four physical therapists and one physical therapy assistant on staff to treat the hundreds of children receiving physical therapy through outpatient care, schools, and the West Virginia Birth to Three program.

Pediatric physical therapists specialize in the examination and treatment of children and young adults (typically from birth to 18 years) to develop or restore movement and functional mobility. Clients may be experiencing physical limitations or disability due to trauma, delayed or abnormal development, a diagnosed medical condition, disease, or unsafe mobility. The primary goal of physical therapy is to help children develop the gross motor skills needed to participate in daily routines at home and in school.

Therapy may address a wide range of orthopedic and neurological impairments that may affect activities such as walking, sitting, and transitional skills. Easterseals commonly treats clients with gait abnormalities (i.e., toe-walking, in-toeing), developmental delays, congenital conditions, sensory processing disorders, neurological and/or musculoskeletal conditions, and general limitations of strength, coordination, balance, flexibility, or endurance.

“We see children with a range of challenges, from those who need a little help with coordination and balance so they can play with their friends appropriately to children who have difficulty walking, whether due to an impairment or as part of their development as a toddler,” shared Tammy Doyle, physical therapist at Easterseals. “Our goal is to help these children become as independent as possible, not only with their functional mobility but also as they play.”

A few tips to encourage gross motor development at an early age include encouraging belly time, limiting time in walkers and bouncers, and spending time at a local playground. It’s also important to allow mistakes, as this can help the child learn and develop skills. Typically, a child can walk with minimal to no support by 15 months, run and jump forward by 24 months, and walk up stairs while alternating feet by three years. If these milestones aren’t being met, follow the mantra of early intervention specialists: “Don’t wait; evaluate.”

Learning Disabilities Awareness Month

Since 1985, October has been celebrated as Learning Disabilities Awareness Month. The National Center for Learning Disabilities uses this time to raise awareness of the struggles people face and fight the stigma associated with learning disabilities.

Learning and attention issues create challenges with reading, writing, math, organization, focus, listening comprehension, social skills, motor skills, or a combination of these. Specific learning disabilities include dyslexia (difficulty with language skills, especially reading), dyscalculia (writing difficulties), and dysgraphia (difficulty processing numbers). Other issues can also affect learning and behavior, such as dyspraxia, a neurological disorder that impacts the ability to plan and process motor tasks, and attention

deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). ADHD is not considered a learning disability by itself but can affect learning, attention, and behavior.

Comprehensive assessment protocols that evaluate many kinds of behaviors and skills are necessary to accurately diagnosis learning and attention issues. Despite common misconceptions, learning disabilities are not the result of low intelligence, laziness, or a lack of quality instruction. However, without the right support, children are more likely to repeat a grade, get in trouble at school, or struggle to find work later in life.

Learning and attention issues impact one in five children in the U.S., but only one in 16 public school students has an individualized education program (IEP) for specific learning disabilities. Millions of children have challenges that have not been formally identified, and, as a result, many fall behind academically and struggle socially. On an average school day, 205 students with learning disabilities drop out.

Early intervention is a key step in improving the lives of children with learning disabilities. While Easterseals doesn't test for specific learning disabilities, occupational therapy and speech-language pathology may assist in modifying tasks and accommodating challenges related to the disabilities to improve children's independence and daily routines.

Addressing Developmental Concerns

Children reach milestones at their own pace, but there are guidelines for when skills typically develop, particularly between birth and age five. Easterseals offers a developmental milestones brochure to help track a child's progress and a confidential online screening tool that can alert families to potential delays to discuss with a healthcare provider. If there are concerns about the child's development, families can request a doctor's referral to Easterseals.