

Acquired Brain Injury in Children and Young People

Brain Injury Support in Northern Ireland

This leaflet is part of the series:
Brain Injury Support in Northern Ireland

Acquired Brain Injury in Children

A child's brain takes 25 years to fully mature and if a brain injury occurs whilst it is developing, it is difficult to predict the outcome and extent of the injury. In adults, the situation is very different as improvements after a brain injury generally occur within the first two years.

The teenage years are when most young people begin to fine-tune skills such as independence and the ability to plan their life. For young people with an acquired brain injury, difficulties in these areas can become much more obvious during this time.

Acquired brain injury affects every individual differently – no two cases are the same. Children may experience difficulties in the following areas after a brain injury:-

- Tiredness and fatigue
- Doing things at a slower pace
- Taking longer to process information
- Difficulties concentrating
- Difficulties focussing attention – being easily distracted
- Forgetfulness
- Following verbal instructions
- Organising and planning
- Maintaining and forming friendships

Support for Parents

When a child has sustained an acquired brain injury, life may change forever, not just for the child, but also for the entire family.

Many parents say that they do not know what to expect, when to expect it or whether to expect anything at all.

New challenges are faced on a daily basis with the child or young person becoming the primary focus to the detriment of other aspects of life.

Feelings of guilt or regret are commonplace amongst many parents in this situation as they struggle to find a balance between their personal life, work life and carer responsibilities.

Parents may also feel overwhelmed by the number of medical staff involved, and may not know what they all do. Over time, their role and level of involvement will become more apparent.

Support for Siblings

Brothers and sisters (siblings) may often feel forgotten when a brain injury occurs because parents, although not deliberately, will naturally focus on the child that has been hurt and have to devote most, if not all of their time, in making sure that their child gets better.

This can be extremely difficult for a sibling to appreciate. They may feel that Mum and Dad have just forgotten about them, that everything has changed and not in a good way and that people are not explaining things so they do not understand what is happening.

They may also feel tremendous guilt that they were not there that day to prevent the injury, that they should have been paying more attention, that they were okay and their brother or sister was not, or guilt that they are even thinking of themselves at such an awful time.

It can be much harder for a young person to express how they feel. They maybe unable to explain it in a way that makes any sense.

How children react will largely depend on their age and understanding of the situation and the kind of support that is available to them. Having the chance to talk to someone like a parent, relative, family friend or another person they feel comfortable with, can make a huge difference and ease the burden for them.

When a child with a brain injury returns home from hospital, it can be difficult for siblings to make sense of why their brother or sister is getting more attention or is acting differently, particularly if they show no signs of physical injury. It does not help that we all tend to think that leaving hospital means that the person is better, when in fact leaving hospital can be the starting point for a range of new concerns and problems.

Having a brother or sister with an acquired brain injury can have a direct impact on a sibling's schoolwork and friendships. Siblings say that they are expected to grow up very quickly, and that they tend to miss out on opportunities that friends are experiencing. It can also be very difficult for friends to understand just what has gone on and just how different things are now.

It can also be difficult for siblings to understand why there is often a set of rules for them and another set of rules for their brother or sister, particularly in terms of acceptable behaviour.

It is useful for your child's school to be informed of the change in family circumstances as your child will be dealing with a range of new emotions. Teaching staff can help ensure that their education does not suffer, as they adapt to their brother or sister's brain injury.

For further information and support, please contact:

Child Brain Injury Trust

Tel: 028 9081 7145

Web: www.cbituk.org