

Physical Management of Students with Complex Health Care Issues

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April 2009

Objective

- Understand the uniqueness of students with special needs
- Understand the roles of the health care professionals, teaching staff & administrators
- Analyze and plan for students throughout school day
- Analyze the workplace—in this case, school campus or for field trips
- Increase knowledge of body mechanics
- Learn more about various lifting equipment to cut down risk of injury
- Importance of continuous monitoring and assessment throughout school year

A. School Basics vs. Other Settings

- Team Approach- includes student
- Consultative Role of Physical and Occupational Therapist
- Building a Team for Success

B. Lifting and Moving Students

- Physical Demands of Assisting Students
- Type of Transfers
- Equipment Available
- Personnel Factors
- Physical Layout of School Environment
- Body Mechanics
- Considering student as Number One Priority

Everyday throughout our country, children with special needs arrive at their schools. The challenge of making sure children are safe at school falls on a variety of individuals making up the school team. This includes the parent, teacher, assistants, administrators and health care professionals who make sure children are safe throughout the school day. This includes receiving the appropriate physical assistance necessary to maintain their safety, their health and their dignity as a person. Thanks to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), all children with disabilities receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the Least-Restrictive Environment (LRE).

As consultants for the schools, physical and occupational therapists are highly trained health care professionals who assist the IEP team in the physical well-being of the student. The therapists' responsibility on the team includes continued assessment of the student, review of medical records, maintaining

good communication with the teacher, family and medical community. Any recent physical changes require updating training to the staff.

Factors to Consider

When a therapist is contacted to assist in the training of school staff members, there are many things to take into consideration. Since students have been taken out of segregated settings and integrated into their neighborhood schools, the therapists workload has increased dramatically while the resources (number of therapists) may have not increased. This places an enormous demand on the therapist who is ultimately responsible for the evaluation, training of teaching staff and safety of students. Physical therapists work with the school staff to successfully prevent back or other injuries to the body and make sure children are safe and comfortable throughout the school day by making sure staff is properly trained, the physical area is adequate and any necessary equipment is available and in good working condition.

Physical management of students with special needs generally falls on the instructional assistants and teachers who serve them. The costs of an injury are enormous. The physical and occupational therapists help schools by analyzing work activities which may contribute to on-the-job injuries.

Transferring Students

While a child may show up for school in a wheelchair, there are many activities throughout the day that require school staff to assist in their physical management. Whether it means adjusting the student in their wheelchair for better alignment, comfort or school access or transferring a student to the toilet, changing table, stander or gait trainer, instructional assistants must understand good body mechanics. This is complicated by the often fragile nature of many students. Factors to consider when evaluating students for transfers may include:

- Diagnosis
- Range of Motion
- Strength
- Surgeries
- Movement Patterns
- Ballistic Movements
- Coordination
- Proprioception
- Sensation
- Ability to Sustain Muscle Contractions
- Student's Weight
- Skin Condition
- Braces

- Casts
- Ability to Bear Weight or Assist
- Type of Wheelchair

Other Factors to Be Considered

- Cognition
- Communication
- Cooperation
- Medication
- Other equipment, i.e. suctioning equipment, respirator

School Factors to Be Considered

No two schools are alike. Stairs, ramps, narrow doorways and uneven surfaces make the work of the school team more challenging. As a part of the assessment, the therapist evaluates the school campus to check all areas that will be accessed throughout the day.

Classrooms need to allow access of the student with special needs to be able to see the teacher and the white/chalk board. Locker height and ability to access from a wheelchair are factors when looking at campus access. Visiting the cafeteria, gymnasium, library and play area with thoughtful planning as to how the student will access each area is an important part of the therapist job. The School Function Assessment (SFA) is a helpful resource to the therapist when looking at these issues.

Equipment

As students with more complex medical conditions enter the school system, the use of equipment should be considered to decrease injuries to the student or staff. This may include the use of Hoyer Lifts with Partner Slings, Solo Lifts, Stand-up Lifts and electric hi-low tables. Keeping an inventory and making sure equipment is in good working order may also be the responsibility of the physical and occupational therapist.

Staff Considerations

When a child begins the school year, an assessment is made to evaluate any changes in the student's physical condition. In addition, training new school staff needs to be scheduled into the school day. Staff considerations include their physical condition, experience working with students who have special needs, the staff's learning style and availability of help. Tasks should be analyzed to see if two-person assistance is required. Occasionally even very experienced school staff may over-generalize their knowledge base regarding students. This can

lead to student injuries. It is always important for the therapist to point out the uniqueness of each child.

Summary

Although therapists understand good body mechanics, it can be very challenging to teach in all situations within the school. Each visit to the school should not only be documented in the student's file kept by the therapist, but it is helpful to note the visit with not only the assistants who work with the child, but also the teachers and administration who serve the student. This may be in the form of an email. Any significant changes in the student's physical condition or program may require re-convening the IEP team. Good communication is imperative to successfully working in the schools to ensure child safety. Building good rapport between the therapist and school staff is essential to having a good working relationship throughout the school years.