

Children and Adolescents Living with Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) Advice for Parents, Carers and Teachers

Children and Adolescents living with ABI face different challenges to those of adults living with ABI. These differences relate to the stage that young people are at in their lives and their subsequent life experiences, as highlighted below:

- Children and adolescents are in a stage of rapid cognitive, educational, physical and personal development.
- Children and adolescents do not have established life skills, social skills, a career, a relationship or a family of their own and are faced with developing these new skills and abilities with ABI.
- Children and adolescents are more likely than adults to be bullied by their peers.

Because of these differences, children and adolescents with ABI require support that reflects their specific needs. Consider the points below to assist children and adolescents with ABI to maximise their potential:

- Children and adolescents require clear and age appropriate information about their injury, pitched at a level that is consistent with their cognitive and communication abilities. They need this to make sense of what is different about them and to be able to work towards maximising their abilities. Some adults find it difficult to discuss this with children, but the truth is generally less frightening than that which children and adolescents imagine for themselves if they are not given clear information.
- Young people with ABI must be given opportunities to express and deal with their feelings regarding the experience of ABI.
- It is important that young people focus on their strengths, on improving their skills and abilities and on working towards realistic and meaningful goals.
- Young people with ABI need their parents and siblings to deal with their own feelings about ABI and to provide a positive, supportive home environment. Having a family member with a serious ABI is unavoidably difficult and if family members do not have effective ways to deal with their feelings, it is very difficult to provide a supportive living environment for the young person with ABI.

- Many children and adolescents with ABI find that their greatest wish, yet greatest challenge, is to have friends. This can be a challenge for a number of reasons, including the stigma of ABI and the young person's behavioural, communication and interpersonal difficulties. It is important that a plan is developed which maximises the young person's opportunities to participate in meaningful activities with their peers and to develop genuine friendships with their peers. Having friends can significantly increase a young person's resilience, self-esteem and confidence as they face other life challenges related to their ABI.
- Suitable pro-active supports at school are essential. Children and adolescents with ABI require a curriculum in which they are able to meaningfully engage. They may require specialist support staff, a different physical environment to other students or a modified timetable to maximise their learning potential within the limitations of fatigue.
- In addition to these supports to maximise academic participation, it is important that proactive steps are taken to support children and adolescents with ABI to develop social relationships with their peers. This may involve social skills training and support to participate in leisure activities with other students.
- For many reasons, it is common for young people with ABI to develop problem behaviours. It is essential that these are not accepted as part of the young person's disability. It is important that measures are put in place to promote suitable behaviour. It is crucial to provide opportunities for expressing and dealing with feelings and to help the young person identify appropriate ways of doing so. It is also important to provide a suitable consequence of unacceptable behaviour. Avoiding the development of problem behaviours is an important step if young people are to develop functional peer relationships. Allowing a young person with an ABI to get away with unacceptable behaviour because people feel pity, empathy or are unsure of how to respond, can do great harm to the young person.
- It can be very helpful to educate the young person's peers regarding ABI if he or she is comfortable about this. This may involve the young person with ABI explaining how the ABI affects them, what is different and what is the same about them compared to their peers, why they require more support than others, and answering any questions their peers may have. This process destigmatises ABI as people become more comfortable with ABI once they understand it more fully.
- The vocational prospects of a young person with an ABI are often different to that of their peers. Having clear pathways to realistic and meaningful vocations is very important.

This information sheet has been prepared by Melbourne ABI Counselling. Melbourne ABI Counselling provides specialist counselling for people affected by Acquired Brain Injury. If you would like to discuss your situation with a counsellor, please feel free to contact our office on 1300 29 76 09.

For more information sheets on topics related to acquired brain injury please see <http://melbourneabiccounselling.com.au/abi-information-sheets.htm>