

## Parenting a Child with an Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) Advice for Parents

When a child sustains an ABI, the world of the parents is turned upside down. As well as trying to understand the implications for the child's life, this experience requires the parents to change the way in which they parent that child compared to the way they would have done so prior to the ABI. In addition to the normal challenges of parenting, parents are faced with the complex task of identifying what is realistic and reasonable to expect of their child and what allowances they need to make for their child, given the ABI. Parents also have to navigate parenting other children at the same time and attempt to balance the needs of all family members. Having a child with an ABI can put increased strain on parents' relationships, which causes increased stress for the whole family.

These challenges require the whole family to negotiate and manage the feelings, expectations, aspirations and the need for time and attention, of all of its members.

If you are parenting a child with an ABI it may be helpful to:

- When possible, take the time to talk openly with your partner about the ABI and the impact it has had on your child and the family. It will be helpful if you are able to openly express your own feelings as well as listen respectfully to your partner's feelings. This is particularly important if you and your partner tend to express emotions in different ways. Seeing a counselor experienced in ABI may facilitate this process if you are having difficulty doing this yourselves.
- Encourage all of your children to respectfully share their thoughts, feelings and questions about your child's ABI. Allow them to explore their feelings about the impact of ABI on the family.
- Teach yourselves and your children to focus on your child's abilities, and adapt as many activities as possible so that everyone in the family can participate.
- A child with an ABI naturally requires a lot of your time, emotion, encouragement and care. It is almost inevitable that this will mean a reduction in the time and energy that you have for your other children. Do what you can to make time and space for all of your

- children, this may mean involving a support person to enable you and your partner to have some special time with other children.
- Remember that children often display their feelings through their behaviour and not with words. For example, a child who is uncharacteristically quiet may be feeling stressed.
  - Within realistic limits, considering your child's abilities, have the same expectations of acceptable behaviour from the child who has an ABI as you do of your other children. For a range of reasons parents often find it difficult to discipline a child with an ABI. This may be because parents are unsure of what to reasonably expect from the child with an ABI and are reluctant to put boundaries around behaviour. They may be fearful of setting expectations too high and upsetting the child who is already challenged by ABI related difficulties. It is important to understand your child's abilities and limitations so that you can set realistic standards of behaviour.
  - Most children with ABI can learn manners, respectful behaviour and to abide by family rules. They can be taught this if parents praise desired behaviour and ignore or provide a non-violent negative consequence, such as time out, for unacceptable behaviour.
  - Ensure that your child is receiving suitable support with schooling and learning. Discuss your child's special needs with their teacher each year and pass on strategies that have worked in the past for supporting them. It may be that your child requires a support person with them in the classroom at times.
  - As much as possible, make it a priority to keep in touch with your social networks. If you are finding this difficult, be specific with friends about what would make it easier for you to keep in touch with them. Your happiness is beneficial for your child.
  - If it is available and helpful, use respite. Some parents feel guilty about using respite, but it is important to keep in mind that you will be a better parent if you take a break and manage your stress as needed.

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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>