

Recognizing Physical Health Concerns in Children and Adolescents with DCD

Children with DCD have a lot of difficulty learning new motor skills and often withdraw from physical activities. When they are young, children will usually indicate an interest in trying out organized sports, such as soccer or gymnastics. However, in many cases, they will attend the activity only two or three times and then ask to drop out. Children may withdraw from sports due to the increased effort required to acquire the basic skills, or they may be excluded from activities by their peers. In either situation, opportunities for participation are decreased. By the time children with DCD are 8 or 9 years old, they no longer indicate an interest in trying these types of activities.

Recently, more attention has been paid to the impact that this lack of participation has upon the health and fitness levels of children with DCD. Research suggests that children with DCD are more likely to have decreased physical fitness, including decreased strength, power and endurance putting them at risk for poor cardiovascular health and obesity over the long-term.

Often labeled as “lazy” or “unmotivated”, children with DCD expend much greater effort performing motor tasks than their typically developing peers

Watch for the signals

In addition to withdrawal from physical activity, children with DCD often report feelings of low self-worth and poor frustration tolerance. If the child with DCD is demonstrating more than a few of the symptoms listed below, it may be appropriate to have him or her seen by an occupational or physical therapist for an assessment.

These are some of the symptoms you should watch for as the child matures:

Physical symptoms

- lack of endurance with daily physical activities – walking to school, carrying a knapsack, riding a bike, playground activities
- frequent complaints of being tired or lacking energy
- decreased physical strength for daily activities
- participation in sedentary activities with few physical hobbies
- overall decreased physical fitness including poor cardiovascular fitness

- increase in body weight, possible obesity

Emotional/cognitive symptoms

- feelings of poor self-efficacy, particularly about physical activity
- lack of confidence in physical skills and physical appearance
- reports of isolation from peers
- decreased motivation, or lack of interest, in physical activities

Behavioural symptoms

- tends to watch, rather than participate in, physical activities
- avoidance of motor-based tasks
- frequent complaints of somatic symptoms – headache, stomachache
- assuming the role of class clown at school, especially in physical education class
- poor frustration tolerance – becomes upset/cries easily
- preference to play alone, especially on school playground
- conflicts with parents regarding participation in organized games/sports
- emotional outbursts prior to participation in physical games/organized sports
- gives up easily, quits organized activities after a few weeks