Let's Talk About...

Spina bifida and learning problems at home

Spina bifida may cause your child to have learning problems at home and at school. You can help your child by changing play and learning at home. Below are some things you can do at home.

How can I help my child get better visuospatial and visual motor skills?

(See *"Let's Talk About... Learning issues"* which explains visuospatial and visual motor.)

- Involve your child in activities such as LEGO® bricks, building blocks, puzzles, coloring, painting, cutting, pasting, molding clay, matching shapes, mazes, word searches, visual matching games, and finding the hidden pictures.
- In preschool years, help your child learn basic ideas that relate, such as up/down, in/out, top/bottom, and right/left. Teach these ideas, at first, with objects (like blocks and toys).
- Help your child learn about their body in space though activities like rolling, turning, and somersaulting.

How can I improve my child's reading and understanding of words?

- Spend time reading to your child each day and have your child read to you. Talk about the story and ask your child questions. Help her learn to pay attention to details of the story by pointing out topic sentences, key words, and interesting facts.
- If your child is older, have her read questions about a story or chapter before reading the text.
- Have your child act out the story.
- If you explain things with words, or give her instructions, use short sentences.
- Have your child repeat back what you told her.

How can I help my child pay attention?

- If your child has trouble paying attention at school, have her seen by your child's doctor, a child psychiatrist, or a psychologist.
- Ask your child to look at you before you give her instructions.
- Keep instructions shot and have your child repeat them back to you.
- Break tasks into small parts and give your child one part at a time. Slowly increase the number of parts you give her.
- Set goals so your child earns a reward when she finishes a task or pays attention for a set time. Little by little increase the goal as she is able to do more. For example, at first you could reward her for paying attention for 5 minutes. When she is able to do that, you could raise the time to 7 minutes, then to 10 minutes, and so on. Do not change the goal until she is about to do the first goal over and over.
- Give your child a place free of distractions where she can do her school work.

How can I help my child's memory skills?

- Identify how your child best remembers. A psychologist can help you find this out. Help your child learn to use her strongest memory skill. For example, a child with good visual memory should have a picture in her mind when she listens to a story.
- Play memory games.
- Teach your child to use reminders such as notes, pictures, alarms, and calendars to help remember information. Help your child remember important tasks by using alarms or timers.

How can I help my child with organizing skills?

- Help your child set up a system to organize her things. At first, you should help your child to use

her system until it becomes a habit.

- Help your child set daily and weekly routines for tasks (for example, putting her book bag away in the same place every day).
- Encourage your child to think about items she needs before she begins an activity. Have her gather these things ahead of time. Set up checklists she can use for repeat activities, such as items to take to school or items to take on a sleepover.

How can I help my child develop good problem-solving and reasoning skills?

- Encourage your child to solve problems by herself. Teach her these steps to solve a problem:
  - — Identify the problem.
  - — List all possible solutions.
  - — List possible results to each possible solution.
  - — Choose the best way to solve the problem.
- When reading stories, have your child think about cause-effect relationships or have her make inferences (for example, if she sees smoke, help her think there must be a fire somewhere).

How can I help my child develop good social skills?

- Give your child specific and simple feedback in social situations to teach her about social cues. Be gentle and positive. For example, you could say "It's great that you really like Mandy and want to be close to her, but other kids sometimes don't like you to hang on their arms all the time. Did you see how Mandy pulled away from you when you grabbed her arm?" Don't give your child too much information, or she will feel criticized. Also, too much information will be hard for her to think about and act on.
- Think about signing your child up for a social skills training group, either in the community or at school. Social skills groups may be available at local agencies such as mental health centers or outpatient counseling centers that give mental health services to children.

For more information, refer to these handouts:

- ***Let's Talk About... Spina bifida and educational programs***
- ***Let's Talk About... Spina bifida and 504 plans***
- ***Let's Talk About... Learning issues***

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801.662.3500 Rev. 04/11

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