Let's Talk About...

Spina bifida and physical therapy

It is important that you teach your child with spina bifida to be independent. A key factor to independence is being mobile. You can encourage your child to be mobile by teaching him to:

- Walk
- Walk with the use of braces
- Walk with an assistive device such as forearm crutches or a walker
- Use a manual wheelchair (one the user pushes)
- Use a power wheelchair

To prepare for walking, the physical therapist can teach your child exercises that improve balance and motion. The therapist can also teach your child to use aids such as wheelchairs, braces, crutches, and other equipment.

Will my child walk?

To find out whether your child will walk, you need to ask, "What muscle function or strength is in my child's legs"? Manual muscle testing scores muscle strength on a scale of 0 to 5. Babies born with spina bifida are usually tested before they leave the hospital. After that, they are checked one to two times per year. A score of 0 means that the brain and spinal cord cannot communicate to the muscle. A score of 5 means the muscle has full strength. Your doctor and physical therapist will explain your child's muscle strength and your options for improving it.

Another question to ask is, "How well aligned are my child's bones and joints in the spine and legs"? An orthopedic surgeon can improve bone alignment in the legs, feet, and spine. If needed, the surgeon may consult with the physical therapist and orthotist (brace maker) to fit braces that help align your child's legs during standing and walking.

After your child is born, a physical therapist may prescribe stretching exercises to loosen tight joints in the legs. A physical therapist will monitor these exercises in the early intervention program and through the Spina Bifida Clinic.

How do I encourage my child to walk?

To be interested in walking, your child needs to have an interest in moving and exploring. You can stimulate this interest by encouraging your child to crawl, use a wheelchair, or scoot. Exercising as a family will also help interest your child in walking. Once he starts walking, you will want to make sure he doesn't walk too much. Too much could damage his joints from over use. Sometimes this means having him use a wheelchair more when he is first learning to walk. It also means not pushing your child to walk too soon.

Once your child shows an interest in being upright, your physical therapist can help you decide if your child should use braces to walk. Large braces (taller braces with hinges and bars) and walking aides (such as crutches and walkers) might make walking harder because of the extra weight. If your child is fitted with cumbersome aids and pushed to walk early, he may become frustrated with walking.

Another consideration, and perhaps the most important, is the level of your child's mobility skills. As a parent, you should carefully consider the following questions:

- Can my child do all he wants and needs to do?
- Is my child able to carry toys?
- Can my child carry a lunch tray at school?
- Will my child be able to walk long distances?

Your child's therapist can show him these different mobility skills when he is ready. You should also

have the therapist write a walking program. The program will ensure that your child progresses in walking without injuring himself.

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