

# Let's Talk About...

## Spina Bifida and Home Strategies

Spina bifida can create learning problems that will affect your child at home and at school. By adjusting play and learning activities at home, you can help many of these problems. Below are some activities you can do at home.

### **How Can I Help My Child Improve Visuospatial and Visual Motor skills?**

(See *Let's Talk About... Spina Bifida and Common Learning Issues* for explanation of 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 relational ideas such as up/down, in/out, top/bottom, and right/left. Teach these concepts at first using concrete objects.
- Increase your child's awareness in space through such activities as rolling, turning, and somersaulting.

### **How Can I Improve My Child's Reading and Verbal Understanding?**

- Spend time reading to your child each day and/or having your child read to you. Talk about the story and ask your child questions. Help your child 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.

- Keep verbal explanations and instructions brief. Have your child repeat back what you told her.

### **How Can I Help My Child Pay Attention?**

- If attention problems are affecting your child's school performance, have your child seen by your pediatrician, a child psychiatrist, or a psychologist.
- Ask your child to look at you before giving instructions.
- Keep instructions brief and have your child repeat them back to you.
- Break tasks into small parts and give your child one part at a time. Gradually increase the number of parts given to your child as appropriate.
- Set goals where your child earns a reward for completing a task or paying attention for a set time. Gradually increase the requirements as your child is able to do more. For example, initially you could reward your child for paying attention for 5 minutes. When she achieves that goal, you could raise the time to 7 minutes, then to 10 minutes, and so on. Do not change the goal until your child is consistently achieving the original goal.
- Provide your child with a place to do school work that is free of distractions.

### **How Can I Help Improve My Child's Memory Skills?**

- Identify how your child best remembers. A psychologist can assist in this assessment. Help your child learn to use her strongest memory skill. For example, a child with

good visual memory should picture things in her mind when listening 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 Organizational Skills?**

- Help your child set up a system to organize her belongings. Initially, you will need to prompt your child to use this system until it becomes a habit.
- Help your child set daily and weekly routines for tasks such as putting her book bag away in the same place every day.
- Encourage your child to think about what items are needed before beginning an activity. Have her gather these things together ahead of time. Set up checklists to use for repeat activities such as items to take to school or what 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 the following steps to solve a problem:
  - Identify the problem
  - List all possible solutions
  - List possible consequences to the possible solutions

- Choose the best strategy to solve the problem

- When reading stories, have your child think about cause-effect relationships or have her make inferences.

### **How Can I Help My Child Develop Good Social Skills?**

- Give your child specific and simple feedback in social situations to educate her about social cues. Be gentle and positive. For example, you could say “Jenny, 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 of 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 difficult for her to think about and act upon.
- Consider enrolling your child in 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 provide mental health services to children.

For more information, refer to the following handouts:

- *Let’s Talk About... Spina Bifida and Educational Programs*
- *Let’s Talk About... Spina Bifida and 504 Plans*
- *Let’s Talk About... Spina Bifida and Common Learning Issues*



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