

# STIMULATING DEVELOPMENT IN a CHILD WITH a DISABILITY

*THIS INFORMATION IS NOT A SUBSTITUTE FOR MEDICAL ATTENTION for a developmentally delayed child. Please talk to your family doctor if your child is not meeting his or her developmental milestones.*



NO TWO CHILDREN ARE EXACTLY ALIKE. Children with disabilities—even those who have the same type of disability—have unique needs. In this section, we will look at different types of disabilities and how parents can help children with special needs to learn new skills.

## The Role of Parents

**Provide love and support.** The primary need of any child is the love and support of parents. Sometimes parents of children with special needs become so concerned about stimulating their child to compensate for a disability that they forget the most important task is to love and take pleasure in their child as a human being. When children see that their parents enjoy being with them, their sense of self-worth is nourished. That growing sense of self-worth is an important measure of a parent's success in raising a child.

**Foster independence.** All parents must teach their children independence and help them develop a sense of self-worth and personal fulfillment. Through therapy and play children with special needs learn to deal with their disabilities while realizing their full potential. How much independence your child achieves depends, to a great degree, not only on your child's disability but also on how much you encourage your child to do on his or her own at each stage of development.

**Focus on short-term goals.** All children reach plateaus in their development—times when they seem to stop moving forward, or when they may even take a step back. This can be a difficult time for parents. Parents of children with disabilities must learn to measure the progress of their youngsters in inches rather than yards.

When your child reaches a plateau, it is helpful to look back and focus on how far he or she has progressed. This may also be a good time to focus on short-term rather than long-term goals—finger-feeding, getting dressed, repeating the first intelligible word or phrase, or finally mastering toilet training. When parents focus all their energy on a single, short-term goal, a child with a disability may begin to move forward again. Stopping to observe how your child copes with challenges and how he or she adapts to new and greater demands will help you develop realistic expectations for your child.

Children progress best when their parents function as advocates for them, choosing the most appropriate educational settings, setting reasonable goals, and providing a warm and nurturing environment. Parents should view themselves as partners with professionals in planning the care of their children with disabilities.

## Stimulating Developmental Potential

From the moment they are born, children begin learning about the world around them. They learn through their movements and through their senses of taste, touch, smell, sight and hearing. When one or more of these senses are impaired, the child's view of the world may be different and how they learn from it changes. Yet, with advances in medicine, technology, and our understanding of how babies grow and learn, we can frequently expect far greater physical and mental development from children with disabilities than was possible even a decade ago. How much development depends upon the extent of the disability, how soon it is correctly diagnosed and how quickly the

child is placed in an appropriately stimulating environment. Children with mental disabilities, for instance, need frequent and consistent stimulation because they often have difficulty focusing their attention and remembering. They may also have perceptual difficulties that make it hard for them to understand what is happening around them and why it is happening.

**Focus on the impaired sense.** In many cases, a child's abilities can be improved by stimulating the impaired sense. Children with muscular dystrophy, Down syndrome and cerebral palsy often can benefit from a physical therapy program that exercises all their muscles. Exercising the legs and feet of children with severe cases of spina bifida prepares them for walking with braces and crutches. Children with hearing impairments can learn to use their residual hearing with the help of high-power hearing aids and auditory training that increases and expands their listening ability. Children with severe visual impairments can sharpen their other senses to help compensate for their lack of sight while they learn about their world. Children with Down syndrome and cerebral palsy may also benefit from vision, speech and occupational therapies.



**Work with a therapist.** Stimulation programs geared for children from birth to age three have demonstrated that even children with severe disabilities can learn, grow and participate in the world around them. Parents can lead many of the exercises in such programs themselves, but they usually benefit from the supervision of a trained therapist. Your local health department, public school, or state department of disabilities may have an appropriate infant stimulation program. If not, they may be able to recommend a trained therapist who can visit your home regularly to help your child and teach you appropriate exercises and play. University teaching hospitals and private agencies that serve children with disabilities may also be good sources of information.

**Use play to explore.** Play is an important way of learning for all children. Children with disabilities who can't move around to explore on their own can still learn about their neighborhoods through trips with the family. Within the home, children can be carried or guided from room to room to touch, feel, see, smell or hear various objects. Children with impaired vision can use their hands, faces, feet and other parts of their bodies to explore and learn. Children with impaired hearing need constant language stimulation and, like all children, need to hear explanations for what is happening around them. Pictures in books and magazines are another way of exposing children with disabilities to places, people, animals and ways of life outside their immediate experience.

For more information on helping your child succeed with a disability, talk to your family doctor.

Gathered from the following website: <http://health.howstuffworks.com/hsw-contact.htm>

## HERE'S HELP



Use the **Family Resources on pages 95–99** to learn about a variety of family support services available in your community.