Frequently Asked Questions About Pediatric Power Mobility

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When selecting your first mobility device the choices can be overwhelming. This document will provide answers to the most common pediatric mobility questions. We hope that you will find this FAQ a helpful tool in your decision-making process.

Frequently Asked Questions About Pediatric Power Mobility

Why is early power mobility a priority?

People (especially children) learn by exploring their environment. Studies have shown that without independent mobility, people develop dependency on others – "learned helplessness." Think about how a child learns: approaching objects that spark their curiosity, and exploring these objects using all of her senses (seeing, touching, tasting, smelling, hearing, and moving). Additionally, a key part of learning is making mistakes, and learning from them. When a child is locked in a stationary position – she can look around and see others do things, but all she can play with is what has been handed to her. She can not approach things on her own; she cannot randomly explore things; she does not develop the ability to make decisions on her own. In addition, she might develop negative personality traits as a consequence of dependent mobility. However, countless research studies have shown that power mobility is an effective tool to enhance learning and development. Mobility opens doors for opportunity as well as responsibility – both prerequisites for independence, confidence and a positive self image and attitude.

What is "efficient" mobility?

Your child needs to be able to get around effortlessly and in a reasonable amount of time throughout the day, accessing the same environments as all other children. That means he must be able to navigate the home, in the yard, down the sidewalk, between classrooms at school, around the playground, at church, in the mall, or wherever he goes safely and without becoming fatigued. Sometimes moving a manual wheelchair or walking requires extremely large amounts of energy – which is NOT efficient mobility. For example, if a child requires excessive energy just to get to his classroom – he may not be able to pay attention and learn from the class when he finally gets there. Power mobility is an ideal option to provide efficient functional mobility.

Isn't my child going to lose strength due to using a power wheelchair? Won't a power wheelchair keep my child from walking?

Exercising is important for everyone; however, mobility and exercise are not one in the same. Think of your own routine – you *drive* to the gym to get on the treadmill. You *drive* to the park to ride your bicycle. We even *drive* around wasting time just to find the nearest parking spot at the mall. There are many ways for children with disabilities to develop and maintain strength and endurance. Research studies have found that children typically do not lose gross motor function due to power wheelchair utilization. On the contrary, it has been shown that after receiving independence through power mobility, gross motor skills have actually improved as children are more motivated to move and do things for themselves!

What about hybrid (power assist) wheelchairs?

Some people opt for a hybrid solution, power assist wheels on a manual frame. The wheels are equipped with motors within the hubs. When the user pushes the hand rim, it activates the motors which help the chair to roll faster and longer. These devices are easier to push than manual wheelchairs, and easier to transport than power wheelchairs. However, the user still needs to have adequate strength, motor control, and range of motion in the upper extremities to effectively operate the device. Also, power assist wheelchairs weigh quite a bit even when separated into pieces, and can be difficult to take apart and assemble. Additionally, these wheelchairs cannot be equipped with seat functions, so your child needs to have enough trunk and upper body strength to sit upright all day.

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What is a good age to get started with powered mobility?

In short, power mobility should be initiated as soon as possible. Many children get started using a power wheelchair as early as 12-18 months of age, and some are starting even younger. When you consider typically developing children – they roll at 4-5 months of age, crawl at 8-10 months, stand alone around 9 months, and walk independently at 12-15 months. Based on these developmental milestones, children have the perception of mobility and the concept of directionality before they turn one year old. In order to develop these (and other skills), independent mobility is required. By starting power mobility early, your child will be ready to focus on academic development when she starts school, instead of just beginning to learn mobility. Also, there is a window of opportunity to provide independent mobility before learned helplessness occurs. By waiting too long, your child may have completely lost interest and the motivation to be independent.

Is it safe for a small child to drive a power wheelchair?

Is it ever safe for a small child to be left alone? The answer is obviously no; any small child requires constant supervision and that is no different with a child driving a motorized wheelchair. Supervision, however, is not to be confused with lack of independence. We will always watch over small children, but allow and encourage them to do as much as possible on their own - so eventually they can do these things unaided and unsupervised. There are many ways to enhance safety for a new driver: using bumpers on the chair, making programming modifications (i.e. reducing speed and power), having an emergency stop switch handy. Keep in mind, though, that we all learn by making mistakes. Children fall many times before they eventually learn to stand and walk. Mistakes and failure are a natural part of the learning curve – bumping into the walls with a power chair is also an essential step to becoming a proficient driver.

Is there anything I need to know about helping my child learn to drive?

In brief, learning to drive a power chair is not very different from learning to walk, and you should treat it accordingly. Here are some specific training tips:

- Encourage your child but do not provide too much direction. Don't use language he may not yet understand (Left, Right, Forward, Back Up, Slow Down, etc.) Rather, substitute with simpler words and expressions that he is familiar with (Go, Turn, Stop, Off, On, etc.) Or better yet – don't say anything at all! Let the chair do the teaching.
- Allow him to develop the desire to move, the perceptions of directionality, and the understanding that the controls make the chair move. It is equally important that he realizes that he is in control. Though it may be difficult, keep your distance; he shouldn't feel like you are helping him move in any way. Do not reach for the controls and take over driving instead of your child – unless he is in danger of hurting himself or someone else.
- Utilize safe, open environments while your child is learning to drive: level/firmer surfaces with few obstacles are ideal.
- Use your child's favorite toys, games, and friends as motivation for movement; doing this ensures that his movement is purposeful and has meaning.
- Be sure the wheelchair is programmed appropriately for training. It is advisable to use low speed and low torque/power settings for a beginner.
- Be patient. Understand that some days just sitting in the chair and getting used to the way it feels is part of the learning process, and may be enough. The power wheelchair is a learning tool; your child will develop an understanding quickly if appropriate support is provided.

If you have any comments/questions regarding this guide, please contact:

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