

What is cerebral palsy?



Cerebral palsy is a type of disability that can happen to babies and young children when there is damage in their brain and nerves – see “Nerves” fact sheet.

Cerebral palsy is different for every child. The damage to the brain can cause many different things for children with cerebral palsy...

- It might only affect one side of a child's body (hemiplegia)
- It might only affect a child's legs (diplegia)
- It might affect a child's arms and legs (quadraplegia)
- It might – but not always – affect a child's learning and understanding
- It might make a child stiff (spasticity), floppy, constantly moving (athetoid), or uncoordinated (ataxic) – or a mixture of these things.

It is important to remember that even though you see that the child's arms or legs are different – it's because of things that have happened in the brain (a broken telephone switchboard or telephone wire), not because of things that have happened to that child's arms or legs (a broken telephone).

Other things that might affect children with cerebral palsy:

- Feeding problems – the baby may have difficulty sucking – you may need to massage the baby's mouth and cheeks before feeding and even hold its lips to your breast.
- Communication difficulties – the baby may not respond or react as other babies do – this could be due to problems in the baby's face muscles – you need to be patient and maybe teach your child ways of communicating that don't involve words (e.g. squeezing your finger, raising its eyebrows) – be careful not to think that your baby has intellectual disability just



because they cannot control their muscles.

- Epilepsy – epilepsy is more common in children who have cerebral palsy. Epilepsy can be controlled well by medication, see your doctor if you notice any seizures.

How do I help my child who has cerebral palsy?

1. By loving your child.
2. By including your child in all the day to day activities of the family and house (not leaving your child alone lying on the mat under a mosquito net).
3. By helping your child to have their body in a good position – using pillows that keep the child's arms, legs, head and back in a position that is as normal as possible – see fact sheet "preventing muscle shortening"
4. Playing with your child every day, helping them get to the next step of development – see fact sheet "helping my child get to the next step".

