

The Important Role of Pediatric Physical Therapy

By: Summer Garrison, MPT

Pediatric physical therapy is a particularly challenging and complex specialty area requiring the treating therapist to be experienced in the neurological, developmental and orthopedic patient populations. Physical therapy intervention can be vital in determining the outcome and quality of life for a child with a chronic disability or after an acute injury. It is crucial to recognize the signs for prescribing or recommending physical therapy for the pediatric population. Developmental gains can best be achieved early in a child's life; therefore intervention should not be postponed or delayed.

Observing infants attaining their developmental milestones is a profound experience, but it can be disconcerting when those milestones are delayed. It is important to remember that all children achieve gross motor skills at their own pace and that a range exists that is within normal limits. For example, most people expect infants to be ambulating at 12 months but the range is 12-18 months. What is more significant is quality of movement and tone. When infants are unable to alter their patterns of movement, it may be a sign that they need developmental intervention. Abnormal muscle tone (hypotonic or hypertonic) may prevent them from attaining developmental milestones and can be addressed with physical therapy treatment.

School age children, who have not previously been diagnosed with some form of developmental delay, may start to demonstrate deficits in gross motor function as compared to their peers. Tasks such as skipping, jumping jacks and even throwing or catching may demonstrate a child's lack of coordination, balance or motor planning. These delays can become evident as early as 3-5 years old and could improve after appropriate evaluation and treatment from a pediatric physical therapist. Children typically do not have pain that is not attributable to growth or injury; frequent complaints of aches and pains could be another indication for physical therapy in the young child after their physician has ruled out more serious conditions.

Finally, pediatric physical therapists can assist in the prescribing and sometimes the fabrication of orthotics. Pes planus, idiopathic toe walking, cerebral palsy and hemiplegia are a few of the diagnoses in a vast array of conditions that would benefit from plantar surface, sub-malleolar or ankle foot orthoses. A child's pediatric physical therapist specializing in orthotic fabrication can be invaluable in determining the most beneficial yet least restrictive device.

The scope of physical therapy spans all age groups and diagnoses and a physical therapist that specializes in pediatrics may play an invaluable role in the development, function and quality of life of a child.