

# Resources for Working with Youth with Special Needs

## Cerebral Palsy

In 1843, William J. Little, an English surgeon, first described medically the condition now known as cerebral palsy.

Cerebral palsy (CP) is a disability resulting from damage to the brain. The causes of cerebral palsy are multiple and variable.

CP causes a type of movement difficulty that is caused by injuries, illnesses, or accidents suffered either before, at, or after birth. Messages from the brain that control movement seem to short circuit. For example, a message from the brain to the legs telling them to move is never completed. The message never reaches the legs; thus the legs do not move.

The disability can range from mild to severe, depending on which area of the brain is damaged and how extensive that damage is. Some individuals with CP can walk well, some use braces, some use crutches, and others use a wheelchair.

### Characteristics

Cerebral palsy is nonfatal, noncontagious, noncurable, and non-progressive (does not get worse). It is one of the more prevalent physical disabilities of school-age learners. It is managed through therapy and training. With proper treatment and training, individuals with CP can improve physically, mentally, and socially. The sooner therapy begins, the better.

Approximately 60 percent of all individuals with cerebral palsy have spasticity, that is characterized by tense, contracted muscles. Movement may be jerky, exaggerated, and poorly coordinated. It may be very difficult for them to grasp objects with their fingers.

Additional handicaps such as hearing losses, poor sight, speech impairments, or psychological problems may co-exist with cerebral palsy.

### Help for Leaders

- If the person uses special equipment (for example, braces, wheelchair), know how the equipment works. Ask the individual with CP to show you. For example, know how to operate the wheelchair that is, how to operate the brakes, how to maneuver it up and down curbs, and how to open and fold it.
- If you need some information from an individual with CP, be sure to ask the person. Do not direct your question to another individual who is with them.
- An individual with CP often has difficulty speaking clearly. This does not mean they are mentally retarded.

- For people that have difficulty speaking, communication boards may be used. The boards may be electronic devices or a simple wood board with key words, the alphabet, or a combination of the two.
- A person with CP who uses a communication board will point to the letters to spell out words and/or point to the key words, in order to communicate with you. Be sure to allow the individual time to communicate their wants, needs, and thoughts.
- The electronic devices are similar to police scanners. They have up to 100 different phrases and words on them. The person stops the beam of light when it reaches the desired word, letter, or phrase.
- Most individuals with CP learn as quickly as anyone else and most can do many things.
- Keep in mind the person may have limitations in movements. Spastic motions can make it hard to control or hold a pencil or spoon or be neat when writing or eating. CP can also affect a persons ability to climb, lift, pull, balance, carry, stand, reach, or turn.
- Avoid tension and fatigue situations. These increase rigidity in muscles making it difficult or impossible to do tasks that the person can do when the muscles are relaxed.
- More time may be required to complete a project.
- Contact should be maintained between leader and parents.

## Resources

Sarkees-Wircenski, M., & Scott, J. L. (1995). *Vocational special needs*. Homewood, IL: American Technical Publishers, Inc.

United Cerebral Palsy Organizations  
<http://www.ucpa.org/>

National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke  
<http://www.ninds.nih.gov/index.htm>

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Source: University of Illinois Extension - <http://www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/specialneeds/cp.html>

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