

Beginning Power Mobility

For young children with cerebral palsy



**HEALTH CENTRE
FOR CHILDREN**

An agency of the Provincial
Health Services Authority

Introduction

Children with cerebral palsy (CP) find it hard to control movement. This problem can be quite mild or so severe that it limits what the child can do. The Gross Motor Function Classification System (GMFCS) is a way of grouping children with CP by what activities they can do. This helps parents, doctors and therapists plan the best treatment for children.

- Children in levels 1 and 2 will be able to walk without help
- Children in level 3 will walk indoors with a walker, but often use a wheelchair outdoors
- Children in level 4 may walk a short distance with a walker; or wheel a manual wheelchair indoors. A power wheelchair is often needed for independence
- Children in level 5 have little ability to move by themselves. Power mobility can allow some independence

This handout is written for parents of young children in levels 4 and 5.

Mobility means being able to move around in the environment. Power mobility means any kind of powered device that can help a child move on their own. This includes power wheelchairs, battery powered cars and ride on toys.



Why is it important for my child to be able to get around on his or her own?



The first three years of life are a very important time of development for children. Moving around and exploring helps children develop social and learning skills. Children who cannot move around by themselves become passive. Their future learning may be affected.

Is my child too young for power mobility?

Most children can walk by 12 to 18 months. Children with disabilities need the chance to move by themselves at the same age. This helps their overall development. Research suggests that children as young as 7 months can begin to use power mobility equipment. They can use a power wheelchair well between 18 and 24 months.

How will power mobility help my child?

Research has shown that power mobility helps children with disabilities:

- Move around easily
- Do things without help
- Play and share with other children
- Initiate contact with others or with objects
- Be motivated to take part in activities
- Understand language and communicate with others
- Use their hands and arms
- Be more self-confident
- Participate with children their own age

Will power mobility stop my child learning to walk, or to use a manual wheelchair?

Research has shown that motor skills DO NOT decrease when children use power mobility.

Some studies have shown:

- Better use of motor skills
- More motivation in therapy

Children with CP need to be able to choose where they want to go and what they want to do. Power mobility can be one of the options that they use.

Adults may use a car for long distances, a bike when they want exercise, or choose to walk a short distance. In the same way, children with CP may use a walker or bike for exercise. They may be pushed in a manual chair for outings and power mobility can be used to help them play and explore like other children.



Should I wait longer to see if my child will walk?

Research has shown that on average:

- Children in level 4 complete most of their motor development by 3.5 years
- Children in level 5 complete most of their motor development by 2.7 years
- Children who cannot crawl or bunny hop by age 3 are very unlikely to walk

Which children with CP should use power mobility at an early age?

- Children in Levels 4 and 5 find it hard to move around on their own
- Early use of power mobility can help their development and learning by making it easy to choose where they want to go and what they want to do
- GMFCS level can be known before the age of 2 and does not change as the child gets older
- Children who find it hard to use other mobility equipment (walkers or tricycles) will gain most from early use of power mobility



Are there skills my child needs first before being ready to try power mobility?

We used to think that children had to use switches or a joystick with toys or the computer first but...

Research has shown that young children learn cause-effect and direction more easily in power mobility because it provides more sensory experience.

How can my child use power mobility if he or she cannot hold onto a joystick?

There are lots of ways to use power wheelchairs. Joysticks are the most common but there are also switches and other special controls. Some children use switches with their hands and others use their head or other body part. An occupational therapist or physiotherapist can figure out the best way for your child to drive.

Ask your child's therapist if a referral to the Assistive Technology Team at Sunny Hill would help with this assessment.

What is the best way for my child to learn power mobility skills?

Children learn best by playing and exploring for themselves. They are not like adults learning to drive a car. Too many verbal directions can confuse and distract rather than help.

At first, children need a safe place such as a large open space where they can be free to explore and learn to control direction. Power mobility toys such as scooter boards or cars may be better for very young children than a power wheelchair.

Once children have learned to control direction and to stop, they are ready to use power mobility in other places. They may be able to use it in games with other children or to go on outings with the family. Young children with CP may need more supervision (like other children their age) when they use power mobility.

How can I arrange for my child to begin using power mobility?

Talk to your child's therapist. They may be able to borrow equipment for your child from one of the following sources:

- Child Development Centre
- Medical Equipment Supplier
- Red Cross Loan Bank
- Sunny Hill

A referral to the Positioning and Mobility Team at Sunny Hill may be helpful.

How can my child get a power wheelchair funded in british columbia?

For children on the At Home program or children in care, power chairs are funded as the main wheelchair. Only \$1500 is allowed for a manual chair. If your child's manual chair cost more than this, the power chair will not be funded in full. Extra funding will be needed from service clubs or extended benefits.



First Nations children may be funded through Health Canada rather than the At Home program. This program will only fund power wheelchairs for children who cannot wheel a manual chair.

To receive funding for a power chair, children have to be able to drive forward, left, right; and stop on command or to avoid objects and people. Children with CP may take some time to learn these skills and practice in a loaned chair can help.

Further information

Handouts from Sunny Hill:

- Power to Participate
- Power mobility training ideas

From the web:

- www.childdevelopment.ca
- www.seatingandmobility.ca, see the wheeled mobility section

About Sunny Hill

Sunny Hill Health Centre for Children is a provincial facility offering specialized services to children with disabilities, their families and communities throughout British Columbia. Using a family-centred approach, Sunny Hill helps promote the healthy development of children and youth by supporting families and community service providers in their efforts. It is also a resource for educational services and information about disabilities. Services are delivered close to home in a child's community, or on site at Sunny Hill, located in Vancouver.

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*Promoting Better Health for Children with Disabilities through
Clinical Services, Education and Research*