



3. Practising inclusive education

3.2a Types of support

Introduction

A child or young person returning to school after a spinal cord injury will require a unique, varied menu of support. However, this mix of support need not necessarily be expensive or create significant additional work.

“ **Inclusivity isn't necessarily something that is very complex. [Schools] actually have a lot of the skills and the ability and the resources to be able to include people, just by good differentiation and mixed-ability teaching. They don't need to over-complicate inclusivity. If you have a good school or a good teacher, they are used to differentiating or adapting what they are doing for children.**

Dr. Phil Vickerman, Professor of Inclusive Education and Learning, Liverpool John Moores University

What is more important is that the right support options are identified and provided by the school in consultation with the child, their family and other professionals who may be providing support.

The support a child or young person with a spinal cord injury requires when returning to school is not formulaic. Each child or young person's situation is obviously different and the support they need is too. Any necessary adjustments are determined by the child's medical requirements, academic situation, age, background, emotional and psychological situation and social circles. Understanding what support is necessary entails coordinated communication among all the professionals and adults around the child – but, most importantly, it requires asking and listening to what the child or young person feels they need and want.

“ **The teachers asked me what I wanted. Every week they would ask me how I was doing, is there anything else they could do for me, were the times okay for me to come into lessons, and told me to let them know when I wanted to start increasing the times I was in school. The decisions were in my hands and that helped a lot. I controlled the process. There was a level of trust there. If the school had no idea what I was going through and they weren't supporting me in the right way I would have definitely have wanted meetings with everyone to tell them 'this is what's needed' or 'this is what you can't do' . But because I trusted them I didn't need to do this.**

Ben Cook, 17

One of the first steps of including a child or young person with a spinal cord injury into schools should be developing a support plan. This means knowing what a young person may require in order to feel included in all elements of their educational experience. When a child with a spinal cord injury is due to be released from hospital and return to school, designated hospital staff at the spinal injury centre will contact the school and likely organise a visit to discuss the child's physical and medical requirements.

In addition to this, schools will need to consider what educational changes will need to be made for the student. Not all children or young people with spinal cord injuries will receive a statement of Special Educational Needs, but if they do, an Individualised Education Plan (IEP) and review meetings will be organised.

Even if a child or young person does not receive a statement, organising a meeting with the child, family and relevant professionals to discuss the requirements of a return to school is a vital early step. These plans should be developed alongside the child or young person and their family and regularly reviewed and modified as needed.

A support plan should consider the elements below.

Types of support

Whole school

Developing a whole-school approach to inclusion requires a commitment to its principles across the school community. An inclusive school culture sets the tone that all members will respect each other and expect to be treated fairly and equally.

In developing a whole-school approach towards inclusion:

- 1** Involve positive role models from diverse backgrounds that reflect the diversity of the school. These can be inspiring reminders that difficult situations do not necessarily predict poor outcomes and that those in different circumstances (like using a wheelchair) still have ordinary needs, aspirations and expectations.
- 2** Create a school-wide inclusion policy through the participation of all school members. Ensure other school policies, procedures and practices are inclusive and participatory where possible. See section 2.5 for further information. (Training on writing inclusion policies is provided by [Inclusive Solutions](#))
- 3** Organise regular inclusion training and development for all staff, not just teaching staff. The entire community – including students, management, cleaning and kitchen staff, teachers, families – should be involved in defining and developing an inclusive school culture.

Peer and social support

Peer and social connections are absolutely central to all children and young people's experiences at school. That does not change when one experiences a spinal cord injury – in fact, the importance may even increase. It is therefore as valuable for schools to recognise social development as it is for them to support educational outcomes.

“ **My family and friends were my rock, if it wasn't for them I wouldn't be here now. They kept me going, they would never let me slip behind, and they would always check how I was. As time went on they got used to it and they got used to my different types of needs.**

Ben Cook, 17

“ **Our student has close friends and we endeavour to encourage as much social contact as possible during school hours, without the presence of an adult (teaching assistant). We try not to engineer situations because that's a very crass way of dealing with the matter. It's important to let the young person decide what they are comfortable with in terms of friendships. They still have their ups and downs and you have to allow them to deal with them how they wish.**

SENCo, Gloucestershire

- 1 If the child or young person likes the idea, consider using a buddy system that pairs them with a trusted friend who knows what their requirements are and can help them readjust to school life.
- 2 Develop an inclusive school culture by tackling bullying, providing positive role models related to disability, including Disability Equality issues and training in the curriculum and disallowing any discrimination or hurtful comments.
- 3 Use school policies and practices to ensure the child or young person can be fully included in all social events, school trips, and day-to-day break times like recess and lunch.
- 4 Recognise that 1:1 support or physical therapy may be useful and important for the child or young person but may also impact on their participation in social times during the day and their feelings of isolation from their peers if it happens during the school day.
- 5 Develop peer support or peer counselling programmes as part of an anti-bullying or wider inclusive strategy

Classroom support and pastoral support

When a child or young person returns to school after a spinal cord injury, many educational adjustments may need to be made. Support in the classroom should be well coordinated with pastoral support so that the student has sufficient assistance to re-adjust academically, as well as socially and emotionally. It is also important that the student has access to the regular structure of support rather than a wholly separate one, so they do not feel singled out or excluded from the experiences their peers have.



One of the great improvements has been getting the staff to understand that they will need to change their teaching methods and strategies – to change teaching styles. For example, our student has had to become an auditory learner – she has a scribe but she has to take everything in aurally, she needs to make sense of it all very quickly. We have adapted to our student.

SENCo, Gloucestershire



Our student has full access to academic and pastoral mentors to discuss issues to do with her learning and plans for the future. We have felt it is important she has the opportunity to express her views and explore the different options available to her. As in the case of any student, making decisions independently and encountering different people in a variety of contexts builds confidence to deal with matters yourself. We see this as an important life skill when entering the work place or going to university.

SENCo, Gloucestershire

1. Work closely with the health team at the spinal injury centre and the child or young person to understand any new physical requirements they may have in order to be included and participate in lessons. This may include how they receive and record information, write, use their senses, and move around the classroom.

- 2 Discuss what types of equipment or assistive technology would benefit the child or young person in the classroom. The occupational therapist at the spinal injury centre and charities specialising in this information (such as [Aspire](#) or [Ability Net](#)) can be helpful resources.
- 3 Be aware that teachers may need support in helping adapt activities and may also find working with a child or young person with a spinal cord injury to be an emotional experience.
- 4 Teachers should be trained in the medical and physical requirements of students and should also be aware of the emotional and social issues related to experiencing spinal cord injury. Speak to the spinal cord injury centre to discuss where to obtain required training.
- 5 Teachers should also recognise that a child or young person's confidence with learning and their educational future may have been affected by their injury, particularly for young people in secondary school who are considering what they will pursue after school. Some young people with a spinal cord injury will need to adjust their perceptions and ideas of what they wanted to do in life and will need encouragement and optimism within the classroom to get through these adjustments.
- 6 Teachers should also be aware of their own perceptions of what is possible for a child or young person with a spinal cord injury to achieve. Teachers should be supported to challenge their own perceptions of disability; this can be done through a number of methods for example: effective disability awareness training, organising presentations by people who have a spinal cord injury, linking with other teachers and professionals.

“ As professionals with responsibility for the student's additional educational needs and welfare, we are very conscious of compliancy. We've learned that there are great ideas and services to assist a young person with a spinal cord injury – but it's essential that it's what the student wants. Just because it's available, doesn't mean that it is appropriate. Occasionally you have to be proactive with your student and negotiate, so it is understood what is in their best interests. However, they will do what they are comfortable with. You can't force the pace of change. They've already had so much to adapt to if they've experienced a trauma. You've got to let them take on new initiatives within a sensible timeframe and at their own pace. The worst assumption is that you have all the answers and know what's best.

SENCo, Gloucestershire

Specialist support

Some students with spinal cord injuries may need or use specialist support. This could include support from medical teams, such as physiotherapists. Some schools develop spaces within their premises for physiotherapy or other specialist support.

- Work with the child or young person and family to determine the best way to support the need for specialist services.
- Specialist care like physiotherapy is often scheduled during social times so that the student does not miss classes. Recognise the importance of hanging out with friends and classmates and work with the student to find a mutually agreeable time that minimises impact on classes and social time.

Flexible schooling

Students with SCI may be unwell more often or need to spend significant time with medical and health teams, so home schooling or more flexible learning schedules may need to be an option.

The LEA is duty-bound to provide access to education, as per Section 19 in the Education Act 1996:

Each local education authority shall make arrangements for the provision of suitable education at school or otherwise than at school for those children of compulsory school age who, by reason of illness, exclusion from school or otherwise, may not for any period receive suitable education unless such arrangements are made for them. Suitable education is defined as efficient education suitable to the age, ability, and aptitude and to any special educational needs the child (or young person) may have.

Further guidance on Access to Education can be found [here](#)

A pupil is entitled to a home tutor after 15 days' absence from school. They can expect to receive a minimum of 5 hours tuition per week but in some areas or circumstances, it could be more than 5 hours.

Flexible schooling may also be required upon the child's initial return to school. Organise a schedule that suits both their physical and emotional readiness to come back to school, which may mean they only attend partial days or use a less crowded room for lessons until they are comfortable being around people again.

“ **I found it really hard even getting in the car let alone going into the school itself. But the school was really supportive. They never forced me to do anything; they let me take it at my own pace. Instead of chucking me straight into lessons surrounded by people, they let me stay in a room where I felt comfortable with students coming in and out, until I was used to being around people again before I went back into my lessons.**

Ben Cook, 17

Review meetings

Meetings held to review the progress and support plan for a child or young person with an SCI will be known by different names. But hosting such meetings is an important element of any inclusion process. They help maintain connections between staff and students, check in with the students to see how they are feeling as they readjust to school life, and determine what additional changes can be made to improve their situation.

Things to keep in mind when planning and hosting review meetings:

- 1** Children and young people should always be involved in review meetings where decisions are made. Family members should ideally be involved as well. Sometimes it may be more appropriate for professionals to meet on their own to coordinate services or better understand each other's role, but any significant decisions or support plan reviews should involve children or young people and their families in a meaningful way.
- 2** Use the circles of support model to help organise and plan meetings – and to know who should attend. More information about the model can be found in section 1.2.

3 Other professionals outside the school could also attend, including health teams, mental health professionals, social workers or community organisations where involved. Ask the child or young person or their family who else they would like to include.

4 It may be useful to have an advocate working alongside the child or young person. Review meetings can feel very professional and adult-focused, and younger people or families can find this intimidating. Having a school staff member or peer support the child or young person before and during review meetings can help ensure they are comfortable to participate and their opinions are expressed and receive a response.

5 Review meetings can be short and regular occurrences, to check on certain aspects of the child's educational experience. Organise them with the child or young person to determine what level of support they feel they need.

6 Bring a positive, encouraging message to the meetings that assures the student that the changes and adjustments being made are important and valuable to the whole school community, rather than an additional work load or too expensive.

Resources to link to or include

- [Blueprint guide](#) 'Going Back to School: Supporting Young People Returning to School with Spinal Cord Injury: A Guide for Schools'
- [Department for Education](#): guidance on access to education for children and young people with medical needs
- [ALLFIE](#) (Alliance for Inclusive Education) Inclusive Education Guide for Professionals
- [Ability Net](#) – National charity helping disabled people use computers and the internet. Host of information on assistive technology
- [Access to education](#) for children and young people with medical needs – a 2001 DfES guidance document
- Knight, A, Petrie, P, Potts, P and Zuurmond, M. (2008) [The school lives of children and young people with a spinal cord injury](#). Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London. Report for Back Up.