



4. Support for young people

4.5 Returning to school

Introduction

You might feel nervous going back to school after your spinal cord injury but hopefully you are also looking forward to seeing all your friends and teachers again.

In this section there are some stories from other young people and their advice to help you when you go back to school.



Being in hospital and not being able to see your friends does take its effect on you.

Dean, 15

Before you go back

If you are still in hospital maybe you could suggest that your friends come to visit you. They might feel a little nervous too!



I would suggest before a newly injured person even considers going back to college that they should contact the school, talk to the staff and make arrangements for every different scenario that might happen and every single part of their individual needs. Make sure everything's in place before they return, and make sure the school fully understands about having a student there with a spinal cord injury.

Ben, 17

Talk to your school

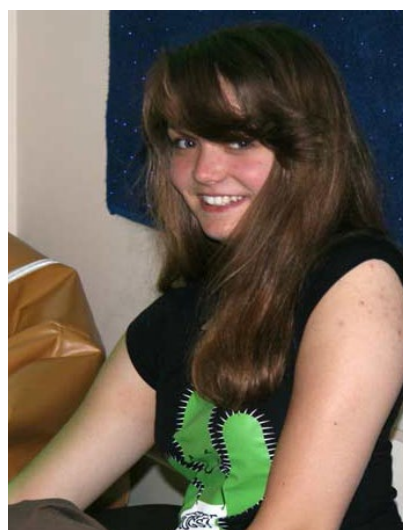
Laura's story

What would have helped you more?

Confidence. That's a huge thing. No one comes out of hospital feeling 100% confident, so maybe having more assistance in bringing out my confidence, and helping me realise that I wasn't a freak, that I wasn't a crazy alien in a wheelchair. If you're growing up in a wheelchair you think you're abnormal because no one is going through the same things you are. It would have helped to have more reassurance from more people that's it's okay to be a bit different.

When I went to high school I was wrapped up in cotton wool, not by my parents but by the teachers, by the school in general and the system. The attitude was that I was in a wheelchair and that I couldn't do anything and that I'd need loads of help. I wanted to be just like everyone else and that prevented it. I had a teaching assistant come around with me, the first year everyone made friends and I found it really hard to make friends because I had someone with me all the time and they saw it as a barrier. They couldn't talk to me about anything because there was a teacher there. So I think more openness and understanding between teachers and pupils would help.

At first it was apparently necessary to have the teaching assistant with me, but by year 9 when I had grown more confident it wasn't. I then said that it wasn't necessary to have that support anymore. The school listened to me which was good.



There were lots of rules and regulations that I was made to follow that I don't think were needed. There was a rule that I wasn't allowed to go in the lift on my own which was really annoying. At first I wasn't allowed to go in the lift with just my friends so I didn't have any because all the constraints of having a teacher with me all the time. Then I could go in the lift but only with friends. When you're at school your friends sometimes want to go and do something else. So there were occasions when I would get stranded because I couldn't go on my own in the lift. In year 11 I deliberately broke the rules, put my foot down and said I don't need someone with me all the time, I don't need all this protection. Then the situation got sorted out and I loved the last few years of school.

What advice would you give a young person?

Even if your confidence is totally blown don't be afraid to say what you want. Schools and colleges really do want to help and for you to have the best time, but you can sometimes feel afraid of offending people and want to be polite but it gets to the point when, because you're not allowed to do certain things and all the constraints put on you, you don't realise what you're missing out on. And I missed out on a lot of freedom and a lot of fun and friendship because I was too afraid to speak out. So I would say to someone who's just starting out at schools after an injury, don't be afraid to say what you want. If you don't like something say it, if you want something changed say it, because it's only you who can make that difference. I did eventually, I do now at college and it helps everyone around me.

Since leaving my school there have been two other wheelchair users, and the school has lifts, doors, and ramps that are really good for wheelchairs. The school have asked me what's good, what needs changing? They want to improve the experience for the person in a wheelchair.

What kind of things helped you when you went back to school?

Deciding to start drama outside of school helped because it gave me more confidence to make friends. Playing the guitar as well that was a big help for me, it helped me look forward to things at school.



Obviously you are going to be nervous to start with, it's a completely natural feeling. I was in hospital for five months and I hadn't seen my friends once. It was emotionally scarring and did hurt me quite a lot. But it's an amazing feeling going back and seeing all your friends again, so look forward to it.

Dean, 15