

## **Family and friends – How you can help**

*A child in your family or circle of friends has been diagnosed with hemiplegia. You may want to offer help and support but are unsure how to go about it. You may not even have heard of the condition. Yet your help could make a big difference, and we hope that reading this leaflet will give you the confidence to offer it.*

### **What is hemiplegia?**

Childhood hemiplegia affects about one child in a thousand, and there is no cure. It is most often caused by a stroke which happens before or around the time of birth, or less commonly by an accident or illness later in childhood. As with any stroke the most obvious result is weakness or stiffness and lack of control down one side of the body. It is uncertain why, or indeed when it happens. A few factors, for example premature birth, are known to play a part. Mostly it appears to be pure chance, and certainly nothing to do with anything the mother does or does not do in pregnancy.

### **What problems can be associated with hemiplegia?**

Hemiplegia can bring with it a whole range of problems - epilepsy, visual impairment, emotional and behavioural problems, dyslexia, problems with maths and difficulties with concentration are all common. Children with hemiplegia usually live in a 'mainstream' world, and life can be a constant struggle to keep up with their peers. And these 'invisible' problems can be more frustrating and disabling than the more obvious ones. Hemiplegia acquired later in childhood after an accident or illness can be especially frustrating, since the child has to struggle to do things that were easy before. The process of recovery may go on for years, and the child needs patience and constant encouragement.

Bringing up any child is a voyage into the unknown. When a child has a disability the stresses and uncertainties are magnified, and the support of family and friends more important than ever.

### You can help the parents by:

- **Listening to them.** A sympathetic ear can be a lifesaver in difficult moments.
- **Believing** what they tell you about the child. Parents feel guilty enough without being blamed for aspects of their child's behaviour which they are working hard to change.
- **Praising and encouraging** - and not just when things are going well. It is when life is difficult that a reminder of what has been achieved is particularly welcome.
- **Giving parents a break.** Offer to look after the child for a few hours to allow the parents time alone or with their other children. Alternatively, offer to look after brothers and sisters to give parents more time alone with the child with hemiplegia.
- **Helping with therapy.** You might feel more confident about this if you can drop in on a therapy session, so that you can carry on the work the parents do with the child at home.
- **Caring for the child.** If the child has epilepsy find out what to do if the child has a seizure.
- **Finding out** about hemiplegia for yourself - HemiHelp has a wide range of leaflets which you can download from our website or order through the office.

### You can help the child by:

- **Treating him or her as an individual.** A child with special needs has the same needs for love, attention and acceptance as any other child.
- **Trying not to make comparisons.** This child may not be picked for the school football team or reach Grade 7 piano, but might be putting in as much effort for more modest gains, and will gain immeasurably from as much praise and encouragement as you can give them.
- **Developing a special relationship.** It might be just going out to a café or reading together, or it might be teaching (or re-teaching) a skill - swimming, riding a bike or even the dreaded shoelace-tying! Children with hemiplegia often have low self-esteem, and such attention can give them a real boost.

And of course don't forget **brothers and sisters**, who can feel pushed aside by the child with special needs. They need your attention too.

HemiHelp provides information and support for people with childhood hemiplegia and their families.

You can help us continue and expand our work by:

- Making a donation, or better still setting up a standing order.
- Organising a fundraising event, no matter how small.
- Remembering HemiHelp in your will. Contact the office for a form.

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*Although great care has been taken in the completion and preparation of this leaflet to ensure accuracy. HemiHelp cannot accept responsibility for any errors or omissions.*

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