

DEVELOPMENTAL COORDINATION DISORDER (DCD): INFORMATION SHEET FOR HEALTH PROFESSIONALS



Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD) is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects the development and performance of motor skills. Children with DCD may experience difficulties with activities that require coordination, balance, motor planning and sequencing.

DCD can affect participation in everyday classroom activities, play, sport and self-care. Importantly, these difficulties are not due to a lack of effort, motivation or intelligence.

What might DCD look like?

Children with DCD may experience difficulties with:

- Handwriting, drawing and other fine motor activities
- Dressing, using cutlery and managing fasteners
- Running, jumping, catching and throwing
- Learning new motor skills
- Balance and coordination
- Organising and sequencing physical tasks
- Participating in sport and physical education
- Completing everyday activities efficiently

Children may also experience fatigue, frustration or reduced participation when activities require significant motor effort.

How common is DCD?

DCD is estimated to affect approximately **5–6% of school-aged children**. Despite its prevalence, DCD may remain under-recognised or be mistaken for clumsiness, poor motivation or behavioural difficulties.

Greater awareness among healthcare and allied health professionals can support earlier identification and appropriate referral.

When should DCD be considered?

DCD may be considered when a child demonstrates persistent difficulties with motor skills that are below what would be expected for their age and developmental stage.

Particular attention should be given when motor difficulties:

- Interfere with everyday activities.
- Affect participation at school or in play.
- Persist over time.
- Require considerably more effort than expected.
- Impact the child's independence or quality of life.

A diagnosis should not be based on a single observation or assessment. A comprehensive developmental and functional assessment is important.

Assessment and Diagnosis

The assessment of DCD should consider the child's motor abilities alongside their everyday functioning and developmental history.

The **DSM-5-TR** diagnostic criteria include:

- A.** Acquisition and execution of coordinated motor skills are substantially below what would be expected given the child's chronological age and opportunities for skill learning.
- B.** The motor difficulties significantly and persistently interfere with activities of daily living and/or academic productivity, leisure and play.
- C.** Symptoms begin during the early developmental period.
- D.** The motor difficulties are not better explained by intellectual disability, visual impairment, a neurological condition or another medical condition affecting movement.

Assessment should therefore consider both **motor performance and functional impact**.

The Role of the Multidisciplinary Team

- Children with DCD may benefit from input from a range of professionals, depending on their individual needs.
- This may include:
 - Occupational therapists
 - Physiotherapists
 - Paediatricians
 - Psychologists
 - Speech-language therapists
 - Teachers and other education professionals
- Collaboration can help ensure that assessment and intervention address the child's participation across different environments.

Intervention and Support

Intervention should be individualised and linked to meaningful activities and participation. Depending on the child's needs, support may include:

- Task-specific motor practice
- Strategies to improve participation in daily activities
- Environmental adaptations
- Assistive technology or equipment
- Support for handwriting and classroom participation
- Guidance for parents and educators
- Strategies to promote physical activity and participation

The focus should be on helping children participate in meaningful activities and develop functional skills, rather than solely on improving isolated motor performance.

Consider Co-occurring Difficulties

DCD may occur alongside other developmental or learning difficulties. Healthcare professionals should remain attentive to concerns relating to attention, learning, communication, emotional wellbeing and other areas of development.

Identifying co-occurring difficulties can support appropriate referral and more comprehensive care.

The focus should be on helping children participate in meaningful activities and develop functional skills, rather than solely on improving isolated motor performance.

Communicating With Families

Families may have been told that their child is simply "clumsy" or "not trying hard enough." Providing clear, respectful information about DCD can help families understand their child's experiences and identify appropriate support.

Professionals can help by:

- Using clear and accessible language.
- Acknowledging the child's strengths.
- Explaining how DCD may affect everyday participation.
- Providing practical strategies for home and school.
- Encouraging collaboration between professionals, families and educators.

Conclusion

Early recognition of Developmental Coordination Disorder can make an important difference to a child's participation, independence and quality of life. Medical and allied health professionals play

an important role in identifying persistent motor difficulties, considering differential diagnoses, supporting assessment and connecting children and families with appropriate services.

A collaborative, child-centred approach can help ensure that children with DCD are understood, supported and given meaningful opportunities to participate at home, at school and in their communities.

Recognising DCD is the first step. Understanding the child's individual needs and supporting meaningful participation is what makes a difference.