

A PARENT'S GUIDE TO DEVELOPMENTAL COORDINATION DISORDER (DCD)



Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD) is a common neurodevelopmental condition that affects a child's ability to learn and perform coordinated motor skills. It can influence everyday activities at home, school and during play. DCD is not caused by a lack of effort, motivation or intelligence. With understanding, appropriate support and early intervention, children with DCD can develop strategies to participate confidently in everyday activities.

This guide provides parents and caregivers with an overview of DCD, what to look out for, how it may affect children, and ways to support a child at home and at school.

Understanding Developmental Coordination Disorder

What is DCD?

Developmental Coordination Disorder is characterised by significant difficulties in the acquisition and execution of coordinated motor skills. Children with DCD may struggle with tasks such as:

- Writing, drawing or using scissors
- Getting dressed, doing buttons or tying shoelaces
- Using cutlery
- Riding a bicycle or scooter
- Playing sport or participating in physical activities
- Learning new movements
- Keeping up with peers during games
- Organising and completing everyday tasks

These challenges are not due to a general medical condition or intellectual disability but are specific to motor coordination. DCD can lead to frustration, low self-esteem, and social withdrawal, making it essential to address these issues through advocacy and research.

Prevalence and Diagnosis

Research indicates that DCD affects approximately 5-6% of school-aged children. However, many children remain undiagnosed or misdiagnosed, often being labeled as "clumsy" or "lazy." This lack of awareness can hinder access to appropriate interventions and support.

Diagnosis typically involves a comprehensive assessment by healthcare professionals, including

occupational therapists and paediatricians. Early identification is crucial, as it allows for timely interventions that can significantly improve a child's quality of life.

DCD Is Not a Sign of Laziness

Children with DCD may sometimes be described as “clumsy,” “slow” or “not trying hard enough.” These descriptions can be hurtful and do not reflect the difficulties the child is experiencing.

Motor tasks that appear simple to others may require considerably more effort and concentration for a child with DCD. Understanding this can help parents provide encouragement rather than pressure.

Recognising the Signs

There is no single way that DCD looks in every child. Some possible signs include:

- Frequently dropping or knocking over objects
- Difficulty learning new physical skills
- Taking longer to complete tasks such as dressing or writing
- Avoiding activities that involve movement
- Difficulty with handwriting or drawing
- Struggling with buttons, shoelaces or cutlery
- Difficulty with balance or coordination
- Finding it challenging to follow multi-step instructions
- Becoming tired or frustrated during activities that require coordination

Having some of these difficulties does not necessarily mean that a child has DCD. A qualified healthcare professional can help determine whether further assessment is needed.

Assessment and Diagnosis

DCD is diagnosed through a comprehensive assessment. Healthcare professionals consider a child's motor skills, everyday functioning and developmental history.

Assessment may involve professionals such as occupational therapists, physiotherapists, paediatricians, psychologists or other members of the healthcare team.

Early identification can help children and families understand their difficulties and access appropriate support.

Supporting Your Child

Parents can support children with DCD by creating opportunities to practise skills without making the child feel pressured.

Helpful strategies may include:

- Break activities into smaller, manageable steps.
- Give your child enough time to complete tasks.
- Demonstrate a task before asking your child to try it.
- Encourage practice through enjoyable activities and play.
- Focus on effort and progress rather than perfection.
- Allow your child to use helpful tools or adaptations.
- Encourage independence while providing support when needed.
- Celebrate achievements, including small improvements.

At School

DCD can affect classroom activities as well as participation in sport and play. Parents can work with teachers to identify strategies that make school activities more accessible.

Possible classroom supports include:

- Allowing additional time for written tasks
- Providing alternatives to lengthy handwriting where appropriate
- Breaking instructions into smaller steps
- Giving the child opportunities to practise new skills
- Considering seating and classroom organisation
- Providing support during physical education
- Allowing appropriate assistive technology or adapted equipment

Communication between parents, teachers and healthcare professionals can help ensure that support is consistent across environments.

The Role of Healthcare Professionals

Occupational therapists and physiotherapists can help children develop strategies to participate in everyday activities and improve their confidence and independence.

Support may focus on:

- Developing motor skills
- Improving participation in everyday activities
- Finding alternative ways to complete difficult tasks
- Adapting activities or environments
- Building independence
- Supporting participation at home, school and in the community

The goal is not simply to make a child “move normally”, but to help them participate meaningfully in the activities that are important to them.

Supporting Your Child's Confidence

Children with DCD may become frustrated when activities that seem easy for others require more effort from them. Parents can help by creating a supportive environment where mistakes are part of learning.

Try to:

- Listen to your child's concerns.
- Avoid comparing your child with siblings or peers.
- Recognise their strengths beyond motor skills.
- Encourage activities they enjoy.
- Give praise for persistence and problem-solving.
- Help your child understand that needing support does not mean they are less capable.

When Should I Seek Help?

Consider speaking to a healthcare professional if your child consistently experiences difficulties with coordination or everyday activities and these difficulties are affecting their participation, learning, independence or enjoyment.

You do not need to wait for difficulties to become severe before seeking advice. Early conversations with your child's healthcare team can help you understand their needs and identify appropriate support.

Conclusion

Supporting a child with Developmental Coordination Disorder starts with understanding that every child's experience is different. With patience, encouragement and the right support, children with DCD can build confidence, develop independence and participate in the activities that matter to them.

Parents play an important role in recognising challenges, advocating for their child and working together with teachers and healthcare professionals. Early identification and appropriate support can make a meaningful difference, helping children feel understood, included and empowered to reach their potential.

Remember

DCD is only one part of who your child is. Focus on their strengths, celebrate their progress and help create opportunities for them to participate and thrive.