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Clumsy child may have a developmental disorder

It's a concern for some parents. Their child is clumsy and uncoordinated. He walked late, never learned to tie his shoes, struggles with zippers and is so bad at sports that teams choose him last or not at all. Teachers are frustrated because they can't read his writing and frequently call about his immature behavior. The parents feel guilty because he has few friends and seems so unhappy. They wonder why their child is like this and what they can do.

Parents and teachers are often concerned when a child is different, but because clumsy behaviors are not widely accepted or easily diagnosed as symptoms of a "disease," it is not easy for them to find help or support. Since at least one in five children, primarily boys, suffer from clumsiness severe enough to interfere with daily activities and school performance, many stressed and confused parents do not know how to respond to this problem.

Parents, who dream of their children developing the skills of a Tom Brady, Tiger Woods, or Serena Williams, find it painfully frustrating to watch their awkward child move stiffly like a robot, or flop like a scarecrow. While multiple names have been used to describe this group of symptoms, including awkward child, minimal brain damage, and motor dysfunction disorder, experts now agree that this is a specific disease and use the term Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD) when diagnosing these children.

Making the diagnosis is important to both family and child, all of whom already know something is wrong. Putting a label on the problem validates concerns, frequently reduces stress, and gives families and patients a focus for treatment. Parents find comfort in learning that their child's lack of coordination is itself a disorder and not a symptom of a more serious progressive disease.

Failure to diagnose and treat this disorder, however, has significant consequences. Clumsy children are not athletic and appear weird to other kids. They tend to be excluded from or avoid sports and are often isolated from

potential friends and peers. They develop poor self-esteem and lack the confidence to try new activities. The subsequent lack of exercise lessens muscle and bone growth, further reducing motor development.

To make the diagnosis of DCD, a child must meet the following criteria;

Coordination abilities fall below age expectations and intellect (walking, sports ability, handwriting).

The coordination problem interferes with school, sports, and social interactions.

All known medical conditions, such as Pervasive Developmental Delay, cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, and trauma have been excluded.

Consider asking your pediatrician to evaluate your child for DCD or other problems if:

- At age 4 he can't catch a 12 inch ball or pull up a zipper
- At age 5 she can't dress herself or catch a tennis ball
- At age 6 he can't skip or catch a ball
- At age 7 she cannot tie her shoes or ride a bike

A pediatrician's evaluation will include a comprehensive developmental history, and complete physical and neurological examinations, as well as additional tests to rule out other medical diseases or conditions. If no other disease process is found, a diagnosis of Developmental Coordination Disorder may be made.

Treatment begins with an educational discussion, since the cause of this disorder is currently unknown and, for reasons that are unclear, the body does not function as the brain wishes. Early speech, occupational, and/or physical therapy intervention can be very effective in improving motor development. Perceptive parents, accepting siblings, an understanding teacher, and supportive classmates can alter an awkward child's self-esteem and prevent secondary academic, social and emotional issues. Gone untreated, the disorder can lead to school avoidance, depression and anxiety, common secondary conditions that might have been avoided.

Screening tools and strategies are available. Write me at enbailey@partners.org or ebailey@aap.org or at NSCH, 57 Highland Ave, Salem, MA 01970 if you would like a copy.

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