

Developmental co-ordination disorder (dyspraxia) in children

Contents

1. Overview
2. Symptoms
3. Diagnosis
4. Treatment

Developmental co-ordination disorder (DCD), also known as dyspraxia, is a condition affecting physical co-ordination. It causes a child to perform less well than expected in daily activities for their age, and appear to move clumsily.

DCD is thought to be around three or four times more common in boys than girls and the condition sometimes runs in families.

This topic is about DCD in children, although the condition often causes continued problems into adulthood.

Symptoms of DCD

Early developmental milestones of crawling, walking, self-feeding and dressing may be delayed in young children with DCD. Drawing, writing and performance in sports are also usually behind what is expected for their age.

Although signs of the condition are present from an early age, children vary widely in their rate of development. This means a definite diagnosis of DCD does not usually happen until a child with the condition is five years old or more.

When to seek medical advice

If you're concerned about your child's health or development, talk to a GP or health visitor, or speak to a nurse, doctor or special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) at your child's school.

If necessary, they can refer your child to a community paediatrician, who will assess them and try to identify any developmental problems.

Causes of DCD

Doing co-ordinated movements is a complex process that involves many different nerves and parts of the brain.

Any problem in this process could potentially lead to difficulties with movement and co-ordination.

It's not usually clear why co-ordination doesn't develop as well as other abilities in children with DCD.

However, a number of risk factors that can increase a child's likelihood of developing DCD have been identified.

These include:

- being born prematurely, before the 37th week of pregnancy
- being born with a low birth weight
- having a family history of DCD, although it is not clear exactly which genes may be involved in the condition
- the mother drinking alcohol or taking illegal drugs while pregnant

Treating DCD

There's no cure for DCD, but a number of therapies can help children to manage their challenges.

These include:

- being taught ways of doing activities they find difficult, such as breaking down difficult movements into smaller parts and practicing them regularly
- adapting tasks to make them easier, such as using special grips on pens and pencils so they are easier to hold

Although DCD does not affect how intelligent a child is, it can make it more difficult for them to learn and they may need extra help to keep up at school.

Supporting someone with DCD will be tailored to your child and usually involves a number of different healthcare professionals working together.

Although the physical co-ordination of a child with DCD will remain below average, this often becomes less of a problem as they get older.

However, difficulties in school – particularly producing written work – can become much more prominent and require extra help from parents and teachers.

Dyspraxia or DCD?

While many people in the UK use the term dyspraxia to refer to the difficulties with movement and co-ordination that first develop in young children, this term is used less often by healthcare professionals.

Instead, most healthcare professionals use the term developmental co-ordination disorder (DCD) to describe the condition.

This term is generally preferred by healthcare professionals because dyspraxia can have several meanings.

For example, dyspraxia can be used to describe movement difficulties that happen later in life because of damage to the brain, such as from a stroke or Head injury.

Some healthcare professionals may also use the term specific developmental disorder of motor function (SDDMF) to refer to DCD.

While this is a difference, and can be challenging, we don't necessarily support the use of the word 'disorder'.