

Learning and cognitive effects of acquired brain injury

Meningitis and septicaemia can be a cause of acquired brain injury (ABI). This is an injury to the brain that has happened after birth.

This fact sheet includes information about difficulties with thinking, learning and making decisions as a result of ABI after meningitis and septicaemia.

ABI can adversely affect the way a child is able to use and develop cognitive skills such as memory, attention, concentration, and executive functions such as reasoning, problem solving and the use and understanding of language. This in turn can have a significant impact on all aspects of learning. Because different mental functions are located in different parts of the brain, ABI as a result of meningitis and septicaemia can affect some, but not necessarily all of these skills.

The brain takes over 20 years to fully develop. Difficulties with cognitive skills may not be immediately apparent when a child leaves hospital because they may be too young to have developed certain skills. If a young child has meningitis or septicaemia, it may be months or even years before any difficulties become evident. Older children will probably retain skills that have already developed, but there may be difficulties with skills that usually develop at a later stage. Additionally, children who demonstrate difficulties at an early stage may make progress in these areas over time but then go on to experience different challenges as they continue to develop.

It is really important that you report any concerns about your child's development to your GP, health visitor or child's teacher as soon as possible.

Sometimes cognitive difficulties will become apparent when a child starts school for the first time, but this will not always be the case. Some difficulties may not become apparent until a child goes to secondary school when they are expected to show more independence, planning and responsibility compared to primary school. This, along with more homework and tighter deadlines, can make it very difficult for a child with ABI to keep up with their peers without having some appropriate additional support.

The special educational needs (SEN) of children with ABI are often complex and sometimes difficult to identify. If your child has additional needs or special educational needs, a support plan could help. This might be an education, health and care plan (EHCP) or an individual education plan (IEP). Both plans focus on your child's individual needs to help them reach their full potential.

An IEP is usually created by the school and sets out your child's goals for the year and any special support needed to help achieve these goals.

An EHCP is a legal document that outlines any special educational and health needs that your child has. It also covers the support your local authority must put in place to help your child.

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Memory problems

Different areas of the brain are responsible for the many processes that make up our memory ability. ABI can affect some or all of these processes to varying degrees, so every child who experiences memory difficulties will have their own individual, specific strengths and weaknesses.

For memory to function properly, the brain needs to be able to gather, store and categorise information so that it can be easily retrieved when needed. If any of these stages are affected by ABI, a child's memory can be impaired.

- **Encoding** is the term used for “taking in” information that is read, heard, seen or experienced and then registered in the brain. The ability to do this relies on other factors, such as attention, that can also be adversely affected by ABI
- **Storage** is a complex process by which information is filed away for future reference. There are different levels of storage e.g. on a short or long term basis
- **Retrieval** of information that has been stored completes the memory process. This can be deliberate e.g. remembering a fact to answer a question, or automatic e.g. remembering how to get dressed without really thinking about it. Following ABI, it can be very difficult for children to retrieve stored information.

There are many different ways that information is remembered or recalled for different purposes. These can all be affected by ABI.

- **Working memory** is the term used to describe the initial “holding point” for information as it is registered by the brain. There is only a limited capacity to hold information in this way; it needs to be deliberately and quickly sorted or organised to be of any use. Instructions given by a teacher are held in working memory whilst they are sorted. Following ABI, children can find it difficult to organise or sort information in their working memory. This is often related to difficulties with attention and organisation skills and can make it difficult for a child to follow instructions.
- **Episodic memory** comes from personal experiences or episodes in life, e.g. what you did on your summer holiday. These are not always consciously remembered, but they are retained. The ability to remember these experiences can be affected by ABI.
- **Procedural memory** involves learning a procedure or set of actions, usually by practice and repetition, which then becomes automatic and doesn't need to be thought about consciously. In young people with ABI, the ability to use this type of memory is not often affected.
- **Semantic memory** involves learning information deliberately e.g. a list of facts or rules. Children with ABI can find this very difficult, especially if the information is out of context and doesn't relate to other aspects of their life.
- **Explicit and implicit memory**
 - o **Explicit memory** involves consciously learning and remembering information, and being aware of how this was done, e.g. studying for an exam. This can be difficult for children following ABI
 - o **Implicit memory** is used when skills or knowledge are acquired without the child consciously trying to learn e.g. the child “picks it up” through play and interaction with others

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- **Sensory factors** can affect a child's ability to encode information. Most people have a preference as to how they remember things;
 - o **Visual memory** – remembering things that have been seen
 - o **Auditory memory** – remembering things that have been heard
 - o **Motor memory** – using physical actions to help remember things e.g. some people recall phone numbers by remembering the pattern of movement their fingers make on the key pad as the number is dialled.

The ability to encode information in a specific, preferred way can be affected by ABI. This may mean that a child has to try to develop and practice other ways to do this, which can be difficult

- **Recall** is an essential part of the memory process that allows the retrieval and use of information that has been stored. This ability can be impaired following ABI and a child may need to be prompted or given cues to help with recall.

Memory loss in the early recovery period after meningitis or septicaemia can sometimes be restored. However, in general, prolonged memory loss is unlikely to recover. This can have a significant impact on a child's life; affecting their home, school and social life. It is important to report any concerns to your GP or child's teacher. A referral to a neuropsychologist, who will assess your child's memory, may be needed.

There are many strategies that children with memory difficulties, and their families, friends or teachers, can use which will make the most of the memory ability that has been retained.

The Brain Injury Hub, written by The Children's Trust, contains an extensive amount of information on all aspects of brain injury, including memory loss and practical tips to help children at home and at school:

<https://www.thechildrenstrust.org.uk/brain-injury-information/info-and-advice/living-with-abi/memory-issues>

Headway is a charity that provides information and gives support to people affected by brain injury, and also has practical tips to help with memory loss, which you can access from:

<https://www.headway.org.uk/about-brain-injury/individuals/effects-of-brain-injury/cognitive-effects/>

Attention and concentration

A child's ability to pay attention and concentrate is often reduced during the early recovery period following meningitis or septicaemia. This is usually a short term problem, but in some children, these difficulties can continue as a result of ABI and have an impact on their ability to learn.

Attention is a term used to describe the skills needed to hold information consciously. It is closely related to memory and other cognitive skills, which can also be impaired following ABI. Concentration is the ability to maintain attention over a period of time.

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Attention and concentration difficulties can mean that children find it hard to focus on a task or piece of school work, and are easily distracted, particularly in a noisy or busy classroom where lots of things are happening at the same time. It can also be difficult to do more than one thing at a time; something that most other children take for granted e.g. talking whilst riding a bike. These difficulties tend to get worse when the child is tired, stressed or worried. As a child moves from primary to secondary school, there can also be difficulties in coping with a varied timetable and finding the way around a larger building.

As with memory, there are strategies that can be used to help children make the most of the abilities they have and overcome some of their difficulties. It is really important to raise any concerns you have with your child's teacher so that support can be put in place.

The Child Brain Injury Trust is a charity providing non-medical services to families affected by childhood acquired brain injury across the UK. These services include training for parents and teachers on understanding the educational needs of children following ABI.

<https://childbraininjurytrust.org.uk/>

Executive function

The term executive function describes a set of abilities that control and regulate other abilities and behaviours. Executive functions include the ability to initiate and stop actions, to monitor and change behaviour as needed, and to plan future behaviour when faced with new tasks and situations. Executive functions allow us to anticipate outcomes and adapt to changing situations. The ability to form concepts and think abstractly is often considered a component of executive function. Cognitive skills, emotions and behaviour are all regulated by executive function.

Although different areas of the brain are involved in executive function processes, it is the frontal lobes that are most significant. If these are injured as a result of meningitis or septicaemia, then a child can be left with some of the following difficulties:

- **Planning and organising;** if thinking is disorganised, it can be difficult to plan the sequence of events needed to complete a task.
- **Initiating and sustaining;** a child may be unable to get started with a task even if they have the knowledge or skills to carry it out
- **Goal setting;** a child may start a task, but not have a clear goal in mind. This can lead to them seeming unmotivated or disorganised
- **Inhibiting and self-monitoring;** language or behaviour may be inappropriate because the child isn't able to stop and think about the implications of what is being said or done. This can lead to difficulties with friends when children are young, but can also put older children at risk if their behaviour is inappropriate in certain situations.
- **Problem solving;** these skills are often needed to overcome daily obstacles or changes in routine. ABI can make it very difficult for a child to think of different ways to solve problems
- **Flexible thinking;** a child may find it difficult to cope with changes to routine or meeting new people.

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As with most aspects of brain development, executive function skills mature throughout childhood and early adulthood. Difficulties may not therefore be evident immediately after the child has been ill. The move from primary to secondary school is often a time that changes are noticed, and as with other cognitive skills, it is very important to raise any concerns with your child's teacher.

The charity Headway has a helpful fact sheet about impairments to executive function with some useful practical advice to help overcome some of the effects.

<https://www.headway.org.uk/about-brain-injury/individuals/effects-of-brain-injury/executive-dysfunction/>

How to get help for your child

It is really important that you report any concerns about your child's development to your GP, health visitor or child's teacher as soon as possible.

There is growing evidence to show that having bacterial meningitis and septicaemia in childhood can have an impact on children's learning 1-5. If you are not happy after speaking to your child's GP do not be afraid to be persistent. You can ask to be referred for a neuropsychological assessment and you may find it helpful to take a copy of this fact sheet along with your guide and journal to help explain your concerns. Additionally, if you are not happy that your child's teacher is acting on your concerns you can ask to see the head teacher and request that they make a referral to have your child assessed by an educational psychologist.

An educational psychologist or neuropsychologist can help to identify the special educational needs of children with ABI. The underlying cause of a child's difficulties following ABI may often be unclear until an appropriate assessment has been done.

Once the causes of a child's difficulties have been identified, an individual education plan (IEP) is often required to ensure that the child's specific needs are met and strategies are put in place to help your child's learning.

It is also possible to seek help from a psychologist privately. A directory of chartered psychologists is available from the British Psychological Society website at www.bps.org.uk/bpslegacy/dcp

Further sources of information and support

The Brain and Spine Foundation

The Brain and Spine Foundation is a charity committed to providing reliable information and support to people living with neurological conditions across the UK.

<http://www.brainandspine.org.uk/>

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Brain Injury Hub

The Brain Injury Hub, produced by the Children's Trust, Tadworth provides excellent information and practical advice about acquired brain injury.

<https://www.thechildrenstrust.org.uk/brain-injury-information>

The Child Brain Injury Trust (CBIT)

CBIT is a charity providing non-medical services to families affected by childhood acquired brain injury across the UK. These services include training for parents and teachers on understanding the educational needs of children following ABI. They also produce a range of useful publications.

<https://childbraininjurytrust.org.uk/>

Headway

Headway is a charity that provides information and gives support to people affected by brain injury.

<https://www.headway.org.uk/>

Further reading

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