

# Better lives by the power of the brain

CHICAGO—For years, scientists and physicians alike have touted the remarkable abilities of the human brain. It was very refreshing to see the Tribune's recent series "Unlocking the Mind" and its exploration of the scientific discoveries on how the brain actually works.

Even more encouraging was the April 18 editorial praising the benefits of early intervention.

The Pathways Awareness Foundation, a not-for-profit education organization, has emphasized the belief in early intervention for children with movement difficulties and delays. The brain, as the Tribune reported, is influenced by environmental experiences.

Some children attending treatment programs like the Pathways Center for Children have difficulty only with movement, while others also have problems with vision, hearing, speech or learning. Children who have difficulty with muscle control may be slow in learning to do things that other babies develop easily without being taught.

In such programs, parents and their children learn that by taking action early — when babies are just learning to sit up, crawl or walk — they maximize the abilities of infants with movement problems and prevent disabilities that might otherwise occur because of weakness or lack of movement. By helping the brain to solve early movement problems, children can look forward to a brighter future.

Early intervention can mean physical, speech or occupational therapy. Movement difficulties in infants can be evaluated based on warning signs that parents, grandparents, child care providers — anyone who is around babies — can recognize.

If potential movement disorders are detected early, young babies can be taught to crawl more

efficiently, rather than allowing them to learn improperly on their own because of a movement disorder. With this early intervention, the babies are not given the opportunity to learn bad movement habits that can tighten their muscles, so they don't need to unlearn them.

An important message that reporter Ronald Kotulak pointed out is the dynamic quality of the mind that is continually allowing people to learn new things, to "make new connections." Strengthening the connections between brain cells, or what some call pathways to higher learning, are the basis for treating innumerable disorders that many people have simply written off as untreatable disabilities.

What does all this mean? In terms of the treatment of movement disorders, strengthening the use of brain-cell connections that might otherwise be unused may be a key to the success of a child's therapy. What that child learns through therapy and how the dynamics of the mind have the capacity to take over for disabled functions of the body play a great role in that child's development. The sooner we help the child make use of this fantastic ability, the greater the brain power that is available for play and learning.

As health professionals, we are eager to continue to study the science of the brain and adapt these findings to better help our patients. We applaud the Tribune for taking the steps to better educate its readers on the innumerable possibilities of one of our greatest resources — the brain.

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