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Be informed is best advice for parents



Ann Landers

Dear Ann Landers:
The American public is learning a lot about multiple births and infant physical development these days. I have my own story, which many other families share. My son, who is 10 years old, was diagnosed at 5 months with cerebral palsy--specifically, left hemiplegia. From the

beginning, I was concerned about his physical development. Although I was always met with compassion at the monthly pediatric visits, my concerns regarding his left-hand movement were considered a "wait-and-see" issue. I am not a "wait-and-see" person, and so I did my own research.

When my son was finally diagnosed, he was referred for immediate physical and occupational therapy, so he could learn how to use his body more effectively. Without this early intervention, I don't believe he would now be playing basketball or baseball, walking with only a slight limp, or have total use of his left hand. In fact, my son would probably have little knowledge of how to use the left side of his body, or be aware that it existed.

Physical therapy is a positive, hopeful experience for both parents and children. My heart breaks to see toddler-age children, and even more frightening, school-age children, just being diagnosed. The early years, the formative years where intervention is so critical, have been lost.

A few years ago, your column addressed early detection for children with developmental concerns. The organization that published this information was Pathways Awareness Foundation. Would you please reprint it?

A Grateful Parent in Illinois

Dear Parent: Thank you for asking. Although not all body-movement disorders turn out to be cerebral palsy, physical therapy can still be helpful, and early intervention can make a huge difference, whether the case is mild or severe. As your letter proves, not all doctors are as well-informed as they should be. It is important for parents to ask questions if they are concerned about their child's development, and have no idea what is wrong.

Here are some of the early symptoms to look for:

- Poor head control after 3 months.**
- Stiff or rigid arms or legs.**
- Pushing away or arching back.**
- Floppy or limp body posture.**
- Cannot sit up without support by 8 months.**
- Uses only one side of the body, or only the arms, to crawl.**
- Extreme irritability or crying.**
- Failure to smile by 3 months.**
- Feeding difficulties.**
- Persistent gagging or choking when fed.**
- Tongue pushes soft food out of the mouth after 6 months.**

Pathways Awareness Foundation is still doing a terrific job. Any reader who recognizes these symptoms should write for guidance to Pathways Awareness Foundation, 123 N. Wacker Dr., Suite 900, Chicago, IL 60606, or call 1-800-955-2445 (www.pathwaysawareness.org). You will receive some valuable information free of charge.