

The Goal and Opportunity of Physical Therapy for Children with Down Syndrome

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The appropriate goal of physical therapy for children with Down syndrome is not to accelerate their rate of gross motor development as is commonly assumed. The goal is to minimize the development of abnormal compensatory movement patterns that children with Down syndrome are prone to develop. Early physical therapy makes a decisive difference in the long-term functional outcome of the child with Down syndrome. Beyond this goal, there is an additional opportunity that physical therapy makes available to parents. Because gross motor development is the first learning task that the child with Down syndrome encounters, it provides parents with the first opportunity to explore how their children learn. There is increasing evidence that children with Down syndrome have a unique learning style. Understanding how children with Down syndrome learn is crucial for parents who wish to facilitate the development of gross motor skills as well as facilitating success in other areas of life including language, education, and the development of social skills.

The mother of an infant with Down syndrome recently asked about beginning physical therapy with her child. She began the meeting by asking: “If we start physical therapy now, what difference will it make when my child is nine or ten years old?” **What a great question!** It is exactly how she should be thinking about physical therapy, and, in fact, it is exactly how she should be thinking about all the services for her child. She has focused on the **long-term functional outcome** for her child. That question and that focus have guided my work for many years. This paper will answer her question. What difference, indeed, will it make years from now, when a child is an adolescent or an adult, whether or not he or she had physical therapy as a child? This article will address the goal of physical therapy for children with Down syndrome, and then looking beyond that goal, will discuss an additional opportunity that is available to parents while their child is receiving physical therapy.

THE GOAL OF PHYSICAL THERAPY

Before discussing what the goal of physical therapy for children with Down syndrome **is**, it is necessary first to understand what the goal **is not**. The goal of physical therapy **is not** to accelerate the rate of gross motor development. This statement is more controversial than it may initially seem to be. Many parents, many physical therapists, and many insurance companies assume that the value of physical therapy can be measured by whether or not a child is achieving motor skills more quickly. Some therapeutic techniques promote themselves by saying that children who are treated with that technique develop motor physical therapy skills earlier. If, however, one begins with the premise that the goal of physical therapy is to accelerate the rate of gross motor development, then one needs to answer the question posed by that mother. What