

Mobility to Ability

Wheelchairs and Schools

A guide for families

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Whizz-kidz
move a life forward

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Wheelchairs and School – A Guide for Families

The right mobility equipment can make an incredible difference to your child's experience of school: bringing independence, autonomy, a sense of achievement – spurring a process of development and well-being that continues as they grow.

At Whizz-Kidz we are devoted to giving disabled children and young people the independence to enjoy an active childhood – at school, at home and at play. By providing customised mobility equipment, training, advice and life skills, we actually give them something even more important: the independence to be themselves.

This guide is intended to help you better understand the benefits of having the right mobility equipment, with advice for how you can work with schools and teachers to ensure that your child gets the best possible experience from his or her school years – both in class and out.

Mobility + Independence = Ability

As they grow, children naturally learn more about their world through movement. The development of independent mobility benefits young people by increasing their interactions with people, objects and the surrounding world. It also gives them the chance to flex their cognitive, emotional and social skills. Over time it all comes together to create a sense of achievement and independence, which is so important to building the confidence to explore and connect with the wider world.

Lack of independence can create a sense of decreased motivation, reduced confidence and bring an overall feeling of frustration. Research shows that disabled children should be given a wheelchair as close as possible to the age when mobility would occur naturally.

Being independently mobile encourages an ongoing cycle of development, in all aspects of a child's well being. As a leading researcher has said, 'Independent mobility becomes ability ... the ability to become a social person rather than a passive observer; the ability to choose which parts of the world you want to explore rather than have them chosen; the ability to test out your environment by defying authority.'

Did you know ... The number of children and young people using mobility equipment has grown by more than 60% in the last 10 years?

Wheelchair-Friendly Schools

With the growth in the number of children and young people using wheelchairs – and powered wheelchairs in particular – schools have responded with policies that ensure sensitivity to daily routines and educational requirements. One of the goals of this 'inclusive education' approach is to bring wheelchair users fully into normal classroom settings.

Students perform best when they are taught skills, and apply them, in the same setting. Being in the classroom matters and wheelchairs can reduce isolation for disabled students and help them become an important part of a regular classroom. Having the right wheelchair or other mobility equipment for your child's specific situation can also enable schools to meet their inclusive education objectives.

Did you know ... Whizz-Kidz provides training to schools and teachers to help them meet the educational needs of young wheelchair users?

PE Day

Inclusive education policies don't stop at the classroom door. Inclusive physical education (PE) has also become a means of bridging the gap between students. Using wheelchair sports within PE classes provides teachers with the opportunity to introduce students to a diverse sporting world.

Breaking down barriers between students is vital to seeing the person within the wheelchair, and not just the wheelchair itself. Encouraging students to regard the wheelchair as an extension of the user can help instil the right attitude between classmates.

For this to happen, PE classes must take your child's requirements into consideration prior to class taking place. A poorly planned sports class will often make disabled students feel left out, with their classmates seeing them as different and incapable.

Ask your school if it applies the universal design for learning approach (UDL) to PE lessons. By using the principles of UDL, the teacher is able to make modifications to three aspects of the activities; namely the equipment used, the rules used for each activity, and the instructions given to everyone taking part.

Whilst not part of the UDL procedure, it's worth noting the possibility of retrofitting your child's wheelchair to make it more sport friendly.

Did you know ... In many cases, local wheelchair services are unable to provide mobility equipment specifically for sports involvement? Whizz-Kidz can provide funding for young people who are keen to take part in sport outside school.

Your child's growing independence: good for them, good for you.

Along with swelling pride, many parents will still feel worry and concern when their child is attending school for the first time – particularly a child with the additional needs related to having a disability.

However, after a period of transition many parents and guardians begin to recognise school-time as an occasion to gain a sense of respite, and an opportunity to engage in their own activities and occupations. The provision of suitable wheelchair equipment means reduced reliance on a parent or guardian within the school environment, and will ultimately enhance family life as a whole.

"The right wheelchair can be the window that enables a child to have greater independence and more active involvement in play."

Better Wheelchair, Better Grades

Your child will want to achieve all the usual objectives at school, from learning to read and write, to making friends, to gaining increased independence. They may be excited by being involved in sports teams, wearing a school uniform or simply playing at break times.

Obtaining the right wheelchair can make the educational experience for a child of any age so much better, so it's important that these expectations and objectives are taken into account when making your selection. It is much more likely that your child will take active responsibility for learning if their wheelchair is helping them to achieve their goals.

When deciding on the right wheelchair, children will have their own sense of what they need. Involving them closely in the selection process can give them a sense of ownership, and therefore a stronger desire to use it. By taking some of the responsibility for the equipment prescribed for them, some of your child's natural concerns about appearing different can be alleviated. They will be less inclined to consider their equipment embarrassing or 'uncool', and more likely to appreciate how useful it really is.

Did you know ... Children as young as 18 months old have demonstrated functional movement within a wheelchair (with the right supervision)?

Talk to your teachers

Even with the rise of inclusive education, every school will have its particular routines, schedules, degree of experience, and level of expertise when teaching children who use wheelchairs. Talking to teachers and school administrators at an early stage will help address any concerns and help identify any potential problems.

One key area to probe is the school's philosophy and how it operates with regards to inclusion and disability. For example, to what extent have they considered the school physical environment and its limitations for students in wheelchairs? Do they have the ability to adapt the curriculum in order to reasonably accommodate disabled students? Is there an effective system of training and support in place for classroom teachers, perhaps involving community therapists, your family and your child?

Once a child begins attending school he or she will spend the majority of their day there, and it quickly becomes the place where they use their wheelchair the most. To encourage seamless integration, the training of an educational staff member to reinforce the wheelchair skills being developed in a student's mobility programme is very important.

Did you know ... Many of Whizz-Kidz' trainer coordinators are wheelchair users themselves?

Preparing for the School Run

Thousands of wheelchair users travel in their wheelchairs -- in vehicles – every single day in the UK with very few problems. Whilst wheelchairs vary depending on the age, size, health and mobility needs of each individual, years of research and rigorous testing have led to minimum standards for transporting users in their wheelchairs, within another vehicle.

These standards include:

1. Wheelchair users should transfer to vehicle seats wherever possible.
2. Wheelchair users should not travel with the wheelchair at an angle or facing sideways
3. Wheelchairs should have their parking brakes applied and their power units switched off during vehicle movement
4. A headrest should be provided for a wheelchair users when travelling in a vehicle where other seated passengers have headrests
5. Wheelchair users should not travel in cars, taxis or minibuses unless the wheelchair is tied down and the user is appropriately restrained

At Whizz-Kidz, we believe children should transfer into a vehicle seat when travelling, as often as is feasibly possible. This is a much safer means of transporting a wheelchair user, however we recognise that additional space will need to be found for transporting the chair itself. Often we will conduct an assessment of a family wheelchair accessible vehicle (WAV) or school transport services, to discuss any issues and look at ways problems can be solved.

For the complete list of wheelchair transportation standards, please visit <http://www.mhra.gov.uk>.

Did you know ... there are more than 750,000 wheelchair users in the UK?

Whizz-Kidz – how we work

Whizz-Kidz takes a Life Journey approach to working with kids, providing disabled children and young people with appropriate mobility equipment, and training for each stage of their life. Highly qualified mobility therapists have a holistic approach to assessing the young person, always taking their needs, opinions and desires into consideration and keeping them at the forefront of the process.

We also aim to involve school staff and therapists, as much as possible. Whizz-Kidz believes that a vital part of providing disabled children and young people with wheelchairs is making sure they know how to use them to their full potential. Whizz-Kidz Wheelchair Skills Training aims to teach the skills and knowledge that children and young people need to get the most from their wheelchairs, and it improves their confidence and independence in the process.

Our courses are designed to enable trainees to achieve the best of their individual potential, and are done so through a codified programme of wheelchair skills training, including schemes of work for young people with complex needs, beginners and advanced users.

Staying Safe

As schools continue to improve how they integrate wheelchairs into the school environment, the process of risk assessment is becoming more common. This is an area where many schools already have processes in place to ensure everyone has a safe and healthy experience.

It's essential to ask straightaway if your child's school has a risk assessment process for wheelchair use. If not, there are three main areas which should be assessed to reduce the potential harm to both the wheelchair user and their classmates:

1. The school environment itself
2. The use of harnesses and belts
3. Your child's level of requirement for manual handling

That means taking a close look at areas such as steps, access, steepness of ramps, doorways and corridors, toileting and changing facilities.

It is also worth considering the storage of powered wheelchairs, if they are to remain in school. Agreeing who will take responsibility for charging powered wheelchairs is crucial. If they run out of power it can cause unnecessary expense for the wheelchair service or the school, as well as the obvious frustration for your child who will have lost, albeit temporarily, their mobility and independence.

Thinking about the process of reporting repairs is another important area, as is having a plan of action in place in the event of a breakdown or malfunction.

How to Conduct a Risk Assessment

There are five steps to completing a risk assessment, and this process can be applied to all potential hazards. These steps are:

1. Identify the hazards
2. Decide who might be harmed and how
3. Evaluate the risks and decide on precautions
4. Record your findings and implement them
5. Review your assessment and update if necessary

A simple rule of thumb is, a hazard is anything that may cause harm. Risk on the other hand, is the chance, high or low, that somebody could be harmed by these hazards.

"Independent mobility becomes ability ... the ability to become a social person rather than a passive observer; the ability to choose which parts of the world you want to explore, rather than have them chosen; the ability to test out your environment by defying authority."

Moving Up: Secondary School and Further Education

The transition between primary and secondary school can be a difficult time in any child's life. Anxieties abound on the part of the child, often compounded by the raised expectations and apprehensions of parents. This is true for all children, but potentially more so for disabled students.

One way to minimise this is to pre-empt key transitional stages within a child's life, so that the right mobility equipment is available at the right time. Doing so will support your child's ongoing sense of independence and promote interaction with other kids. For example, selecting a wheelchair with options for growth built-in will cause less disruption to everyone as your child grows.

Sometimes this means providing a lower seat-to-ground height wheelchair, to enable the child to access low school desks and be at the same physical level as their classmates. This encourages inclusion and prevents feelings of isolation caused by sitting at a separate table or using a wheelchair tray.

Alternatively, risers are often provided for powered wheelchairs to enable young people to have more flexible access to their new school environment, for example being able to sit at higher science lab desks.

Did you know ... Whizz-Kidz will work with you to identify and obtain the most appropriate wheelchair and equipment for your child at every stage. Often we will recommend powered wheelchairs, enabling children to move independently around larger school sites whilst conserving energy for classroom lessons and activities.

Roll On September!

Whizz-Kidz is a national charity, all about giving disabled children and young people the independence to enjoy an active childhood – at school and at play.

In helping kids prepare for life at school in a wheelchair, we aim to involve school staff and therapists as much as possible.

Moving up, Moving on

As your child transitions into adulthood, perhaps going into the work place, further education, or just increased social activity with friends, Whizz-Kidz looks to add additional features for powered wheelchairs. Accessories such as lights, indicators and increased speed capabilities are all considered as equipment to promote independence and improved interactions for the wheelchair user.

Whizz-Kidz organises a variety of complementary services for young wheelchair users of transitional age. These include Skillz for Life training courses, Camp Whizz-Kidz, Kidz Unlimited website and newsletter, work experience opportunities and local Ambassador Clubs. All of these additional resources provide disabled children and young people with support and encouragement during this important phase of life.

Assessment clinics can be run within schools, meaning that children avoid missing school for their clinic appointments. This also enables school staff and therapists to take part more easily. We can offer advice and training to schools, when requested, with regards to posture, seating and general use of both powered and manual wheelchairs.

Whizz-Kidz is already delivering more than 80 wheelchair skills training courses to approximately 750 young people across the UK. Around half of these are organised and held within schools, with teaching assistants and other staff assisting as 'buddies'. This enables school staff to continue training and encouraging children to use their wheelchairs even after the courses have been completed.

Additionally, Whizz-Kidz has involved two special schools – St Francis School in Lincoln and Stephen Hawking School in Tower Hamlets, London – in pilot programmes for Complex Needs Wheelchair Skills Training.

Did you know ... as of 2011, Whizz-Kidz has provided over 170 children and young people with sport-augmented mobility equipment?

Still have questions?

Call the Whizz-Kidz team on 020 7233 6600.

Email us at info@whizz-kidz.org.uk.

Or visit www.whizz-kidz.org.uk/