

Did You Know?

Power Wheelchairs for Young Children

Supporting Medicaid Funding for Children as Young as Two Years Old

Independent movement is important for a child's development. By moving through space, children learn about spatial relationships and become more self-aware. Independent movement provides children with more opportunities to interact with others, improving their social skills. A child's ability to explore and investigate his or her environment enhances cognitive development and improves perception. As noted by Charlene Butler, Ed.D. in *Wheelchair Toddlers*, J. Furamasu, Ed.D., *Pediatric Powered Mobility: Developmental Perspectives, Technical Issues, Clinical Approaches*, RESNA Press:

“In contemporary psychology, there is widespread agreement that locomotion induces or accelerates important developmental changes. Self-produced locomotion have been theoretically linked to the growth of brain structures, the emergence of new capacities to cope with environmental stressors, a new level of self-awareness, shifts in patterns of attachment and interaction with caregivers, emergence of a sense of competence and initiative, and the development of cognition. (Campos and Bertenthal, 1987).”

Many children crawl, roll, or scoot somewhere between 8 and 12 months. By their first birthday, some children are either walking, with or without support, or are pulling themselves into a standing position. Most parents know they must “child-proof” the house at this point because children want to explore and investigate. This ability to explore and investigate is critical to normal childhood development.

What about children with mobility impairments? Independent movement is no less important for them than for those who can walk. Therapists now recognize the need for children to have independent movement, even if that movement occurs through power wheelchairs. They recognize the benefits of powered mobility for young children who have the cognitive capacity and motivation to use a power wheelchair, with or without supervision.

Studies confirm that children can learn to use a power wheelchair at early ages. In a study by Butler, Okamoto, and McKay, *Powered Mobility for Very Young Disabled Children, Developmental Medicine and Child Neurology*, 25, 472-474 (1983), power wheelchairs were given to nine disabled children with normal intelligence between the ages of 20-39 months to use at home under parental supervision. Eight were able to drive safely and independently within a one to seven week period. Driving safely was defined as mastery of seven skills: stopping and starting; driving straight in open areas; driving straight in narrow corridors; turning around; turning corners; backing; and coming in close proximity to people or furniture. The parents reported that their child's social, emotional, and intellectual behaviors were stimulated. They also noticed an increased interest in other forms of movement, such as rocking horses. See <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1469->

[8749.1983.tb13792.x/pdf](http://www.rstce.pitt.edu/rstce_resources/Resna_position_on_Peds_wheelchair_Users.pdf). Roslyn Livingstone, MSc(RS), OT, postulated that power wheelchairs can be introduced as early as 14 months of age and that children can become proficient in using a power wheelchair by 20 months. *Powered Mobility for Infants and Pre-school Children*, Nov. 2011, p. 2.

The Rehabilitation Engineering & Assistive Technology Society of North America (RESNA) has published a position paper, *The Application of Power Wheelchairs for Pediatric Users*, http://www.rstce.pitt.edu/rstce_resources/Resna_position_on_Peds_wheelchair_Users.pdf, supporting the use of power wheelchairs for very young children. The National AT Advocacy Project has this paper and numerous studies available upon request.

Despite overwhelming evidence that young children can safely operate power wheelchairs and derive numerous benefits from independent mobility, funding sources are reluctant to approve requests for funding. In the case of JW, the child had successfully used a power wheelchair in school for over a year. Medicaid denied funding, claiming that since the child is always supervised he could be pushed in a manual wheelchair. Following an administrative fair hearing, FH # 4337314K (NY 2006), the hearing decision rejected this argument, noting that the child's former and current physical therapists argued that reliance on caregivers to push him would be developmentally inappropriate. While the decision approved funding, it took 17 months to get a winning hearing decision. A 17-month wait for a five year old represents a long span of lost learning opportunities.

Recently, a request for Medicaid funding for a power wheelchair for a two year old was denied and a fair hearing was held. The agency claimed that pursuant to agency policy, individuals requesting power wheelchairs must demonstrate the ability to independently use the wheelchair. The agency argued that the child's need for attendant controls (i.e., separate controls that can be used by a parent or caregiver) demonstrated that the child was not capable of independently operating the wheelchair.

In response, the child's physical and occupational therapists explained the child's diagnosis of Spinal Muscular Atrophy Type 2 (a neurological condition under umbrella of muscular dystrophy) does not affect her cognitively. They noted that "mobility is the key to all development" and is the "key to achieving all developmental milestones." FH # 6630954H (NY 2014) at 11. They also noted that the child is in the optimal learning time, has the ability to learn to safely operate the power wheelchair, needs attendant controls for when she becomes fatigued or needs supervision, and failure to give her a power wheelchair now will interfere with her overall development. The hearing decision directed the agency to approve the power wheelchair with requested accessories, including attendant controls.

Advocates and attorneys are encouraged to share their successes involving power wheelchairs and other devices for young children. Those who are reading this post as a list serve posting are encouraged to use "reply all" to share comments or questions that they want to reach all participants on the list serve. Use "reply" to communicate only with the person who did the posting. Copies of the cited hearing decisions are available upon request.

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