



### Brain Injury and Education

#### Notes from an excellent article: **The Student with a Brain Injury: Achieving goals for Higher Education**

([http://www.brainline.org/content/2008/10/student-brain-injury-achieving-goals-higher-education\\_pageall.html](http://www.brainline.org/content/2008/10/student-brain-injury-achieving-goals-higher-education_pageall.html))

School staff are much more familiar with the needs of students with learning disabilities than they are with the needs of students with acquired brain injuries. Students with brain injuries often have different needs than those with learning disabilities. To complicate matters, every brain injury is unique and so the needs of students with an ABI vary. Recovery from a brain injury is a long journey in which the needs of students change - sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly - as they regain functions or discover which impairments require new learning styles. Everyone involved needs to understand that impairments will also fluctuate from day to day, depending on fatigue, stress or overstimulation.

The medical system's labelling of ABIs as "mild," "moderate" and "severe" relates to length of time someone was unconscious and the damage to brain tissue. Sometimes these labels bear little relation to the degree of impairment that a child experiences. Some "mild" injuries, including concussions, can have severe and long lasting impacts on learning.

Dr. Janis Ruoff compares relearning to think following a brain injury to the transition to driving a manual car after a lifetime of driving an automatic. Routine ways of thinking can become frustrating, tiring, difficult and sometimes impossible. Students who didn't have to put much effort into getting good marks before their injury may now require new skills and strategies to in order to learn.

### Cognitive impairments to watch for

Students with an acquired brain injury may experience some or all of the following impairments:

- impaired memory or retrieval of information (students may know the information but have trouble writing it down or speaking about it when asked)
- impaired understanding
- gaps in prior learning (e.g. may have to relearn basic math or history facts learned before injury)
- slow thought processing (teachers need to be patient to wait for the answer)
- reduced attention span (especially when tired, may need frequent quiet breaks or shorter days)
- trouble with time or finding their way to classes
- apraxia (despite having the physical ability, can't remember how to move complex muscles)
- difficulty understanding cause and effect
- lack of awareness of impairments and needs (deny that there is any problem)

## Cognitive impairments to watch for ...contd.

- trouble prioritizing thoughts or figuring out the main idea
- trouble following a sequence or schedule (e.g. steps in a chemistry experiment or math formula)
- misunderstandings or misperceptions of subtle, abstract, conceptual or complex information
- difficulty understanding humour or sarcasm

**“The object of education is to prepare the young to educate themselves throughout their lives.”**

*- Robert M. Hutchins*

## Back to School Time . . .

Here are some tips for going back to school that may help to make life a little easier for everyone.

- ✎ Keep a sheet of the names, roles and responsibilities, and contact information of the people who are involved in your child/youth's school life. There can be many “players” on the team – write it all down!
- ✎ It is indeed a “team” of people available to help your child/youth – don't rely on one person for everything. Your classroom teacher has other resources that you may not know about (e.g. resource teacher, OT, educational psychologist, Ministry of Education consultant, and more).
- ✎ Learn the normal hierarchy of a school. Don't bypass people and go “right to the top” – save that action for when you have tried to have your concern listened to at the school level. The school counsellor or resource teacher/case manager could help you understand the school structure.
- ✎ Start a journal to keep track of all things school related. Write down who said what, who is responsible for what and when things need to be done by. This will make it easier for you to follow-up.
- ✎ Remember that the classroom teacher is the person who is going to implement your child/youth's educational plan, day by day. Take the time to build a working relationship (partnership), with the teacher.
- ✎ Use a separate logbook or communication book that goes back and forth from school to home. The aide and/or teacher can write in any upcoming assignments or activities, and what happened that day. This lets you review the day with your child/youth, and also help keep track of what's coming up.
- ✎ Prepare for meetings. Know what the purpose of the meeting is (e.g. sharing information, setting the educational plan, meeting a new school resource professional, problem-solving a concern, etc.). Ask questions so that you are clear on the purpose of a proposed school meeting.



Educate yourself regarding the school system and children/youth with disabilities.

- ✎ Check out the following website: <http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/specialed>
- ✎ Request a copy of the “Returning to School after a Brain Injury” resource from the Community Brain Injury Program (contains useful information about funding designations, IEP's, accommodations, provincial exams, and tips for success in the classroom).

- ✎ Remember: for school (as well as for other arenas), always build on your child/youth's strengths and interests. It is important for school personnel and other workers to recognize these. You have a lot of information that is important for others to know, including how your child/youth responds to challenges. **You** are the expert on your son/daughter!
- ✎ Finally, don't forget to acknowledge people in the school system who have been helpful. Most school staff do their best, and try to help students as much as they can. However, they may not truly understand brain injury and the various ways it can affect a child/youth's behaviour. You may find yourself educating people over and over – some parents write out a paragraph or sheet and hand it out to staff each year. Search out those professionals who seem to understand what you are talking about, and what your child/youth needs. Make sure they know you appreciate their help.

### **More tips for helping your child/youth have a more positive school experience...**

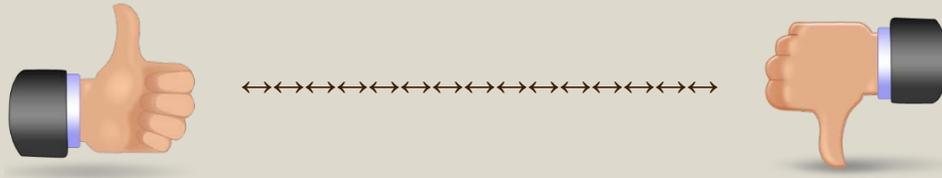
The real-life environment that your child/youth is working and learning in will affect how well they can truly perform or learn. Here are a few ideas to talk about with teachers as your son/daughter returns to school.

- minimize distractions or overstimulation in the classroom environment (high noise levels, busy rooms with lots of photos/images/brightly coloured materials, construction or activity outside).
- pay attention to physical demands that quickly tire—stairs, busy hallways, carrying books.
- think about the lunch environment—perhaps your child can eat in a quiet room with a chosen group of friends.
- think about requesting scheduled or unscheduled breaks throughout the school day in a quiet, low sensory room (younger children or youth lacking insight may need to be cued by school staff to take breaks before headaches or fatigue set in).
- ask that your child receive the teacher's notes or that a good student provide your child with notes in each class, allowing your child to focus on the learning rather than taking notes.
- investigate appropriate Apps for your child, such as Super Note on the IPAD or Dragon Naturally Speaking or apps that proof read (the school occupational therapist may have lots of ideas).
- talk to school staff about extra time for assignments and extra time to write tests in quiet distraction-free environments, possibly with short breaks or more frequent short tests rather than long tests.
- consider whether your child needs a tutor, who understands your child's particular impairments and learning style, to keep up with school work.
- consider whether school staff and classmates could benefit from the free BC Epilepsy Society "Partners in Teaching" program on seizure awareness ([www.bcepilepsy.com](http://www.bcepilepsy.com)).
- given that the needs of students with an ABI can quickly change, especially in the initial months after injury, speak to school staff about writing IEPs that cover shorter periods than a year and review them as your child's needs and abilities change.
- look for a friend or volunteer who can accompany you to school meetings and take notes so you can focus on what is being said and managing your responses. Remember that you can always ask for time to think and research. Very few decisions must be made in the moment.

**"Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire."**

*- William Butler Yeats*

## *Tell us how we're doing...*



The Community Brain Injury Program strives to deliver services that consistently and effectively meet the needs of children, youth and families. In order to continue to evaluate and enhance our services, we rely on feedback from individuals and families about their experience with the Program.

On an annual basis, we conduct a survey of families who used the program that year. In the next few months, a representative of the BC Centre for Ability will be calling many of the families who used the Program in 2014 to ask for your feedback in a variety of areas. The survey does not take very long and will be done with you over the phone. If you prefer not to do the survey by phone, please let us know. We can either send you a link to complete it online, or we can send you a hard copy that you can fill out and return to us.

Thank you in advance for your cooperation with this!

Please remember that we are open to your input at any time -- you do not need to wait for us to contact you. Any feedback you have (positive, constructive, or not so positive) is most appreciated. This is how we remain responsive to the needs of families and provide services that are of benefit to you. Please call or e-mail the Coordinator with any feedback you may have.

### **"A Brain Injury Workbook"**

We are pleased to announce that the Brain Injury Workbook, which was developed with the assistance of teens who participated in the Community Brain Injury Program Youth Transition Project, is now available.

This booklet gives teens the opportunity to learn more about other's experiences with ABI and how to redefine themselves. It also can be a jumping off tool for talking to friends and family about the experience of living with a brain injury. Please contact us if you or your family member would like to receive a copy.

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[www.mybrainonline.ca](http://www.mybrainonline.ca)

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