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Flexible (hypermobile) joints

Hyper means 'more' and mobility means 'movement' and so children who are hypermobile have more movement in their joints than their peers and have less stability in their joints. They can put themselves in strange positions and do party tricks with their joints eg bending their thumb to get it to touch their forearm! In most cases this is due to the child having more elasticity in their connective tissue (the bits that hold the body together).

Children are generally more flexible than adults and will stiffen up in most cases as they get older. They may be flexible in one or two joints or in all the joints in their body. Most children with hypermobility will have no problems with their joints but in a few cases they may experience discomfort which can cause problems participating in activities.

By trying the strategies below, any symptoms relating to hypermobile joints should improve and be manageable.

What you may see

The problems seen with hypermobility depend on which joints are affected. The child may be able to do the splits easily or contort themselves into odd positions. You may notice that they have very flat feet or they may go over on their ankles and frequently sprain these joints.

If they have hypermobile fingers, they may struggle to hold a pen correctly or manipulate buttons when dressing. They may complain of their hands hurting when they write and be slower than their peers to finish their work due to having to stop to stretch out their hands.

When doing lots of walking, they may be slower than their peers and tire more quickly, requiring more frequent rests. After a lot of repetitive activity, they may experience pain due to muscle fatigue as the muscles surrounding the hypermobile joints have to work harder to support the joints.

Children with hypermobility may also have poor proprioception (knowing where your body parts are in space with your eyes closed) and therefore can appear less co-ordinated during movement.



Strategies and advice

At school

If children are having difficulties with hypermobility in their upper limbs:

- Try using thicker pens and pencils or use pen grips which are easier to grip
- When writing, encourage frequent rest breaks to allow stretching of the hands and fingers to prevent muscle cramp. A good stretch is to place the palm flat on the seat of the chair with the elbow straight and the fingers facing forwards and put weight through the hand
- Strengthening the muscles around the joints may help to reduce tiredness so carry out activities involving the muscles of the hands and arms (see 'playdough' and 'fine motor skills' for more ideas).
- Children with hypermobility in their fingers may find holding a pen and producing the refined finger movements needed to produce legible writing at an appropriate speed difficult and may tire easily or complain of muscle pain in their hands. They may not be able to improve this and so alternative forms of recording their work and/or allowing extra time should be considered if this is causing a problem

If children are having difficulties with hypermobility in their lower limbs:

- They need to wear trainers rather than slip on shoes/pumps to give support to their feet and ankles
- Avoid jumping from heights onto hard surfaces. This is because it is hard to control hypermobile joints on landing and they may be damaged by being overstretched
- They will tire more quickly on repetitive movements so be prepared to offer rest breaks. Long distance running will be difficult, especially over uneven surfaces, and this activity may need to be adapted
- If any activity causes pain, allow them to rest and return to the activity if the pain subsides.

When sitting:

- Encourage the child not to W sit (kneeling with bottom between knees) as this can cause leg alignment problems due to the abnormal forces put through the joints (see below for more information about this).
- Encourage cross legged sitting or sitting with legs straight out in front. If they struggle with either of these, offer a chair to sit on instead
- Encourage a good posture in sitting with bottom well back in the chair and the chair pulled right up to the table. A writing slope may help if they still struggle to sit up correctly. See 'Good sitting' advice sheet for more information



General advice:

- Encourage school bags to be carried over both shoulders and for the weight of the bag to be decreased as much as possible by making use of lockers and not carrying unnecessary books etc
- Encourage well-fitting shoes avoiding high heels and slip-ons. Ideally, shoes should be securely fastened with laces or Velcro. If children go over on their ankles frequently, boots are recommended for giving the ankles more support
- Children may be tiring by the end of the day if the school site is large and they may need to make use of lifts, if available, if their legs become sore
- Children do not have to avoid PE unless advised by their GP or physiotherapist.

Out and about

- Even if the child is having a bad day activity is important.
- Building up the strength can help to reduce the pain. What is important is to avoid over stretching the joints and to build up the strength of the muscles to support the joints.
- Swimming is excellent as the water protects the joints as the child exercises.
- Children with a high degree of flexibility may be drawn to ballet, gymnastics, martial arts.
- It is best to avoid sports which involve sudden stopping and twisting such as football, basketball and squash as they may aggravate joint problems.
- Try to maintain a healthy weight as being overweight puts extra strain on the joints and makes them work much harder.

W sitting

When sitting on the ground, the child's bottom, knees and feet are all resting on the ground with the feet either side of the bottom resembling a letter 'W'

There are a number of reasons why children 'w' sit including poor core stability and habit, but it can have a number of detrimental impacts:

- Reduces the use of core muscles impacting on core strength and trunk rotation which can affect the development of big and small movement skills and so participation in everyday activities
- Contributes to the development of a poor sitting posture
- May contribute to an in toeing gait or 'pigeon toes'
- Causes stress on the joints which can result in pain in adulthood



To reduce 'w' sitting:

- Encourage alternative sitting postures including cross legged sitting, side sitting, long sitting, squatting, sitting on an appropriate sized chair or lying on the tummy
- Encourage activities that help develop core strength to reduce the need for them to have a wide base of support. See 'Core stability' advice sheet
- Provide consistent regular reminders for good sitting

If you would like this factsheet in another language or format, for example Braille, large print or audio, please call:

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