

Cerebral Palsy

A Quick Guide for Teachers



What is Cerebral Palsy (CP)?

Cerebral Palsy (CP) is a lifelong physical disability which is caused by damage to the brain, usually during birth or early childhood. The condition mainly affects movement, posture, coordination and in some cases, speech. There can be many symptoms of the condition and the severity of them will vary from person to person – everyone with Cerebral Palsy experiences it differently.

CP is:

- Non-progressive – it doesn't get worse over time
- Very individual – no two individuals with CP are exactly the same
- One of the most common childhood physical disabilities, affecting around 1 in 400 births in the UK.

How might CP affect a pupil?

CP can affect pupils in different ways, including:

- Muscle stiffness (spasticity) or weakness
- Difficulty with balance, coordination or fine motor skills
- Fatigue – tasks often take more energy or concentration
- Speech may be slower or less clear
- Use of mobility aids (wheelchairs, walkers, orthotics)

Some children may also have:

- Pain
- Sensory differences
- Learning, communication or processing differ

It's important to note that CP doesn't automatically affect intelligence and many children will be able to learn, achieve and thrive alongside their peers.

How to explain Cerebral Palsy to other children

It's important to be open and honest when children ask questions about disability. Using clear, simple language helps reduce fear and curiosity in a healthy way.

For younger children, Cerebral Palsy can be explained as an injury to the brain around the time of birth. You might say that the brain sometimes sends mixed-up or slower messages to the muscles, which can make moving, balancing, or speaking harder. This is why someone's body might move differently.

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Reassure children that:

- Cerebral Palsy is not an illness
- It is not contagious
- Everyone with CP is different
- People with CP enjoy the same things as other children and want to be included

With older children, it's helpful to give a clearer explanation and space for discussion. Cerebral Palsy is caused by damage to the developing brain, usually before, during, or shortly after birth. This affects how the brain communicates with the muscles, which can impact movement, coordination, posture, and sometimes speech.

Key points to emphasise:

- Cerebral Palsy is lifelong but non-progressive
- It affects people in very different ways
- It does not automatically affect intelligence
- Many barriers disabled people face are caused by the environment and attitudes, not the disability itself

You can encourage pupils to think about how assumptions and stereotypes occur and why they can be harmful. A conversation around how a space can be made more accessible and inclusive can help pupils to recognise the small changes that can make a big difference for all disabled people.

What helps in the classroom?

Small, thoughtful adjustments can make a difference:

- Extra time for writing, expressing ideas, moving or transitions
- Flexible seating and positioning – leaving clear pathways and easy access to desks, resources, learning spaces and exits
- Assistive technology (Laptops, speech-to-text, adapted tools)
- Flexible routines – offering alternative break or lunch arrangements when busy or crowded spaces present challenges
- Opportunities to rest and manage fatigue

Top Tip: Always involve the pupil and parents as they are the expert in what works for them.

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Language and attitudes matter

- It's always important to focus on the person, not just the disability.
- Try not to make assumptions about someone's needs or abilities
- Model respectful and inclusive language
- Encourage curiosity – it's OK for children to ask respectful questions.

How can schools create a more inclusive culture?

Talk openly about disability as part of diversity. Encourage thoughtful and respectful questions and encourage pupils to share their own experiences of disability.

Challenge stereotypes as they arise – it's important to recognise that individuals with Cerebral Palsy are often underestimated. Avoid assumptions about learning, communication, independence or future potential, and ensure that expectations are based on the individual, not the diagnosis.

Ensure that trips, activities and assemblies are accessible. If you can include the voices and input of disabled role models, this helps pupils to see disability as a normal part of life – not something to fear, avoid or single out.

Further support

If you would like support with disability awareness, inclusive practice or delivering age-appropriate conversations about Cerebral Palsy and disability, I offer assemblies, staff training and consultancy informed by lived experience.

Remember – you don't need to have the answer to every question but by being open and honest and willing to learn models inclusion better than getting everything right!

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