

Use of Wheelchairs in Schools

Introduction

When someone is prescribed a wheelchair there will have been a detailed assessment to decide which is the most suitable wheelchair for them to use. A wheelchair provides their means of mobility to enable them to move where and when they choose to, promotes independence and personal development.

Attendant Propelled wheelchairs



These types of wheelchairs are used if somebody is not able to mobilise independently in a different type of wheelchair. They have the highest level of dependence on the person who is assisting them. Generally it will be an adult who is pushing this type of wheelchair and it is important to remember to communicate with the wheelchair user, eg ask if they are ready to go, warn them if there's going to be a big bump, try not to have a conversation with another adult over their head as they should be the attendant's main focus.

Top Tips for Attendant Propelled Wheelchairs

- Ensure that the lap-strap has been secured before attempting to move off
- Try to keep your back straight and hips tucked under when pushing to take pressure off your back
- Always use the footplates, swing away for getting in and out
- Always let the wheelchair user know when you are about to move off
- If there is no dropped kerb, turn around and guide the wheelchair down the kerb backwards so that you step down first

Self-propelled wheelchairs

When somebody has a self-propelled wheelchair, they are expected to be able to take some degree of responsibility for their own mobility. Sometimes they are only able to push themselves along for relatively short distances, or only on level ground, however, it is good practice to always ask the student if they would like your help before giving it. Have a conversation with the prescribing therapist as well as the student to establish a method of how and when the student will benefit from your assistance.

Students can become over dependent on their support and lose the confidence to get around independently which gives them more opportunities to be off with their friends.



Top Tips for Self-propelled wheelchairs – see Appendix 1 wheelchair skills

- Always ensure that the student is wearing a lap-strap when in their wheelchair
- Make sure that brakes are applied before getting into, or out of, the wheelchair
- Check that door widths are adequate for the student to self-propel without knocking their hands going through doorways
- Invest time in practising wheelchair skills for manoeuvring and safe stopping and starting
- Risk assess the environment at school to identify any areas that would be hazardous for a student self-propelling, eg steep gradients, uneven ground

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When considering whether other students can push their friend who is in a wheelchair, the Health and Safety Executive states, “There is no health and safety law preventing students from pushing wheelchairs” (www.hse.gov.uk/myth/myth-busting/2012/case074-wheelchair.htm#). It would be strongly advised however to ensure that a full risk assessment is carried out and any concerns addressed (see Risk Assessments below). Each case should be looked at on a case by case basis and the parent of the child using the wheelchair must give parental consent.

Power Wheelchairs



A power wheelchair is usually prescribed for a young person who has the necessary awareness and skills to safely drive it around at home and school. They can weight between 70-120kg and travel at speeds of up to 8mph, so it is very important that the driver is safe and able to control their power wheelchair. This is an enabling piece of equipment which allows the user a much greater degree of independence than they would be able to achieve using a manual wheelchair. Some power wheelchairs have a range of

functions such as tilt in space for resting and height adjustable, to go up to high surfaces or practically down to the floor. The controls on a power wheelchair are very sensitive and it can take a lot of practise and concentration to become a proficient user.

Top Tips for Power Wheelchairs – see Appendix 2 Power wheelchair skills

- Risk assess routes around school with the student to ensure that they are fully aware of where it is safest for them to travel
- Agree a back-up plan with parents/carers in case the wheelchair breaks down, eg manual wheelchair kept on site or parents/carers to bring spare to school
- Ensure that the lap strap is worn whenever moving around school
- Try to place the power wheelchair user at the front or back of a line moving around school to avoid accidents
- Find out how to troubleshoot common problems, eg low battery and remember that the tyres need to be kept pumped up, move controller to side when working at a table

Building Access and the environment

Before your wheelchair user brings their equipment into school it is a good idea to do an environmental risk assessment. Walk around the school and look for areas and routes that might be problematic for a wheelchair user.

- Door thresholds not level – doorways too narrow
- Steps or stairs without an alternative route, ramp or has a lift
- Uneven paths and outdoor areas prone to getting muddy or puddles collecting
- Corridors and routes in classroom to desk
- Accessible toilet or care suite
- Specialist teaching areas in secondary schools not on ground floor
- Common areas all accessible and suitable for a wheelchair user, eg dining hall and assembly hall

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You may consider a temporary ramp as a short-term measure. As a rule when using portable wheelchair ramps most ramp manufacturers recommend a gradient no steeper than 1:12 for independent use and 1:8 for assisted use over shorter distances. Gradient calculators and advice on permanent ramps can be found at Wheelchair-ramps.co.uk.

You may ask for your STLS PD specialist teacher or the student's therapists to help you with an environmental risk assessment. All schools are required to have an accessibility plan that details how its children, adults and visitors will access the environment as well as the curriculum. www.pdnet.org has an on-line accessibility survey which can be used to help you identify barriers to access for students with physical disability.

Working in the classroom for wheelchair users

It can be very challenging for a wheelchair user if they cannot get close enough to their desk or table to be able easily reach resources. If the arms of the wheelchair do not go under, or over, the table then the table can be raised to help maintain good posture and independence. Some schools are able to invest in height adjustable furniture which can be moved as the student progresses through school. In secondary schools a simple solution for tables which are too low is to use table raisers, eg [Grip On Raisers](#) which are very secure and simple to fit on and off so they can be taken from room to room. Specialist teaching areas in secondary schools can be particularly problematic if they do not have height adjustable science/technology/art benches. See advice sheet on [Including Students with PD in Practical Lessons](#)

Risk assessments

As schools continue to improve how they integrate wheelchairs into the school environment, the process of risk assessment is becoming more common. There are three main areas which should be assessed to reduce the potential harm to both the wheelchair user and their classmates:

- The school environment itself
- The student's level of requirement for manual handling
- Personal Emergency Evacuation Plan

There are templates for risk assessments on Kelsi using the [Five Step Guidance](#) is a useful way to start your risk assessment.

The environment

Use the information you gathered when you did your environmental survey to

1. identify potential hazards, eg steep gradients, uneven surfaces, mat wells.
2. Think about who might be harmed and how? Is it the person using the wheelchair, somebody assisting them or another person nearby?
3. What could you do to reduce the risk? eg get a portable ramp, maintenance of pathways – use the risk rating matrix to consider whether further action is required
4. If further action is required, arrange for an access visit with a view to commissioning minor works (see Buildings and Adaptations on www.stlsvalence.com)
5. Put a timescale on any further actions and then review if there are any significant changes or within a year of writing.

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Moving and Handling

This relates to whether the student requires assistance to get into, and out of, their wheelchair. There are different levels of support that a wheelchair user might require and we would recommend that all staff supporting wheelchair users should attend a paediatric moving and handling course as well as seeking advice from the student's named physiotherapist on how to assist their transfers. Contact stlspd@valence.kent.sch.uk to discuss your moving and handling training needs

Key information around supporting transfers:

- Always ensure that brakes are applied before attempting a transfer
- For a standing transfer, if possible, swing footplates away so that the student does not step onto them and has plenty of room to move
- Taking off the lap strap is the last step before a transfer
- If moving to a chair or another piece of equipment, eg walker or stander, ensure that the equipment is closely with brakes already applied
- Follow principles of safer moving and handling to protect your back, eg never attempt to lift or pull a student from their wheelchair
- If the student requires hoisting for transfers, ensure that all staff working with that student have appropriate and up to date training
- Ensure that all hoists and lifting equipment is serviced every 6 months and is in good working order, including checks on slings (annual)

Safety issues relating to the use of wheelchairs

Use of harnesses and belts

It is important to consider how and why harnesses and belts are used with wheelchairs. These are provided to prevent accidents or to improve posture.

- They should always be in place before attempting to move off in a wheelchair
- They should not be loose or too tight but have enough space to comfortably insert 2 fingers to check for comfort
- They are not intended to be used for restraint

Other considerations

- Footplates should always be used.
- All electric wheelchair users are trained to make emergency stops, by letting go of the controls.
- The control panel should always be switched off before the child gets out of the chair. This activates the braking system and prevents the wheelchair moving accidentally.
- Heavy school bags will make the chair unstable and likely to tip.
- The wheelchair has been fitted to suit the individual child. No alterations or adjustments should be made to it.
- Remember to only use the cushions and accessories which are supplied with the chair.

Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans

All public buildings should have a record of whether somebody visiting the premises might need help to leave the building in case of an emergency. This applies to students, staff and

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visitors. There is guidance and templates on Kelsi that you can use to help you complete the [PEEP](#). Important considerations for wheelchair uses are:

- Check all egress routes to ensure that they are wheelchair accessible
- If you have to evacuate a wheelchair user from the first floor (lift user) then have you got appropriate resources to get them down to the ground floor, eg Evac chair?
- Do you have enough staff trained in using an Evac chair and are they likely to be on the first, or second floor, if an emergency is sounded?
- Evac chairs are only really suitable to use with wheelchair users who can manage a standing transfer to get from their wheelchair to the Evac chair. They are not suitable for people who need to be hoisted for transfers
- Guidance from fire safety officers in Kent has been that wheelchair users who rely on hoisting for transfers should not use upper floors in a school unless they can transfer into an Evac chair – they will no longer rescue a wheelchair user from a refuge area (place of safety) but the Head teacher or manager should ensure they have planned for the safe egress of all users of their building

Wheelchair services

Check with Wheelchair Services to find out where an electric wheelchair may be used safely and agree with the child things like routes through school, speed limits in the corridor, appropriate behaviour in school and the playground, emergency procedures and ensure that the wheelchair user is aware of the safety of other people at all times.

Ensure that you are aware of basic information relating to a student's wheelchair, eg

- Manual wheelchairs should all have rear stabilisers to prevent tipping – these are often taken off by families as they can make it difficult to manage kerbs
- Further information about manual wheelchairs is available from [The National Back Exchange](#) with guidance on pushing, pulling and supporting wheelchair users

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.

Kent and Medway wheelchair services are operated by [Millbrook Healthcare](#).

(0330 124 4485) Their comprehensive website offers information from referral to maintenance and breakdowns. Reporting repairs is simple and can be done using the online form which can be accessed [here](#).

Wheelchair PE and sports

It is important to offer full inclusion for PE and sports within the mainstream school. Whilst there are obvious difficulties, such as the health and safety of other pupils when wheelchairs are involved, activities can be differentiated to include the needs of all pupils. PDNet provide an advice booklet giving a range of games, activities and ideas which can be accessed [here](#).

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Appendix 1

Wheelchair skills – manual wheelchair (self-propelling)

- Basic wheelchair training tips: (moving forward on a flat surface)
- Grasp the hand-rims and push evenly with both hands.
- Position hands at 11 o'clock for starting the stroke.
- Release hands at 2 o'clock for finishing the stroke.
- Use smooth strokes matching the speed of the moving wheel.
- Avoid jerky accelerations that could cause the wheelchair to tip over backwards.
- Lean forward to avoid lifting the front wheels off the ground.
- Push with longer, less frequent strokes, allowing coasting where possible.
- Touch middle fingers onto the axles during recovery phase to reinforce a circular propulsion pattern.

Stopping

- The rate of slowing can be controlled by how hard the hand-rims are gripped. The hand-rims should run through the wheelchair user's hands. If the wheelchair user stops too quickly, they may tip over forwards. To prevent this, the wheelchair user should lean back whenever they are required to stop quickly.
- Manual Wheelchair – Turning whilst moving forward
- The turn should not begin until the axles rear wheels have reached the object (e.g. corner / wall)
- Slow down the inside wheel.
- Push harder on the outside wheel.

Appendix 2

Electric/power wheelchairs – Moving and stopping

- One person only taking charge and giving instructions.
- The first instruction that a first-time power chair user should understand is 'stop'.
- Driving the wheelchair in circles is an acceptable first-time movement.
- It is acceptable for the child to bump into things initially.
- Consider greater rewards for following instructions.
- Power wheelchairs may be rear-, front- or mid-wheel- drive. This affects the drive path and ease of moving wheelchair forward.
- If the user is over-correcting when driving, changing the contact point with the joystick may improve the fluidity of the driving.
- If the user's hand control is limited, then alternative access can be considered.
- Risks for electric wheelchair users
- On top of issues to consider for all wheelchair users, also consider issues that might leave pupils in electric wheelchairs stranded such as:
 - Power failure or breakdowns
 - Terrain that the wheelchair cannot cross, such as thick gravel
 - Water on the wheelchair causing electrical failure
- Most of these risks can be mitigated by ensuring a suitable backup manual wheelchair is available for use, and that the electric wheelchair is well maintained and that its battery is charged regularly