

the school years toolkit

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Flexible (hypermobile) joints

“Hyper” means more and “mobility” means movement so children who are hypermobile have more movement in their joints than their peers. 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!

This is in most cases 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 at school.

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

However if the child is still complaining of significant pain or has functional difficulties after three months of consistently applying the strategies, please contact CYPIT.

What you may see

The problems seen with hypermobility depend on which joints are affected. You may see in PE that the child can do the splits easily or contort themselves into odd positions. You may notice that they have very flat feet or struggle to keep on slip-on shoes if they have flexible feet and ankles. When running, 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 on a trip that requires a lot 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.

Section 5 **advice** sheets

Children with hypermobility 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. If they are in pain with hypermobility, there will be no physical signs to see as the joints will not swell up or look any different. Pacing activities that cause discomfort may help to reduce pain.

Strategies and Advice

In the classroom

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

- Try using thicker pens and pencils which are easier to grip or using pen grips (see resources). You can also attach pipe lagging around pens or cutlery to increase their width
- 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
- If struggling to fasten buttons, then Velcro, zips or larger buttons can be used instead
- If struggling to do laces, Velcro can be used on shoes or gripper laces (see resources)
- 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. 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
- Try an inflatable wedge cushion such as a “move-n-sit cushion”.

In PE lessons

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

- They need to wear trainers rather than slip on shoes 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.

Section 5 **advice** sheets

Around the school site

- 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
- Pace high impact activities.

Suggested Resources

No-tie shoe laces/cutlery – Homecraft/Roylan, Nunnbrook Road, Huthwaite, Sutton in Ashfield, Nottinghamshire NG17 2HU

Posture Pack – Back in Action, 11 Whitcomb Street ,London WC2H 7HA

Tel: 0207 930809

www.backinaction.co.uk

Pen grips – Special Direct, TTS, Park Lane Business Park, Kirby-in-Ashfield, Nottinghamshire NG17 9LE

Tel: 0800 318686

www.specialdirect.com

www.hypermobility.org

www.arthritisresearchuk.org – provide information on hypermobility.