

Role of Physical Therapist in Wheelchair Clinic

The Physical Therapist who evaluates patients in our wheelchair clinic has extensive experience not only in pediatrics but also spina bifida as she is the primary PT in our Neonatal Intensive Care Unit and she was the primary PT in our Spina Bifida clinic for ~10 years. Patients are evaluated as young as 1-2 years of age throughout adulthood.

A comprehensive evaluation is completed and the person's functional level is assessed as it relates to mobility with an emphasis on independent mobility, no matter the age of the person. There are many people we serve who are 100% wheelchair users and in that instance we are concerned for the integrity of their upper extremities and the goal is to decrease potential for overuse injuries which could occur over the course of their lifetime. If a person is able to ambulate they may require a wheelchair for longer distances when the person becomes fatigued. The wheelchair will continue to allow the person to be independent with their mobility when their legs become fatigued. We strive to consider all environments a person may encounter in their life—not just their home environment. We take into consideration their functional mobility needs at school, work and community. We also consider transitional times in a person's life and how their mobility needs may change—such as transitioning to high school, learning to drive, going to college and entering the work force.

Growth is a strong consideration during this evaluation process and again, each child grows at their own speed. Orthopedic surgeries to the child's spine and lower extremities will also affect their posture and positioning in their wheelchair systems. Information that is provided to families in our Spina Bifida clinic as well as education provided by school/outpt PT's will also assist to ensure that your child has appropriate range of motion and strength. It is important for all families to work on range of motion as this can also directly relate to how your child transfers into their wheelchair or how your child is appropriately positioned in the wheelchair.

When evaluating a toddler, this PT will consider how the child will transfer into and out of the system as well as having the child at the level of their peers. The child is evaluated to determine their potential for mobility and independent mobility is strongly encouraged. Parents are also provided with methods to foster their child's independence, knowing that initially the parents will be needed to assist. Each child is different and their cognitive skills vary from child to child therefore our recommendations will vary from child to child--- one child may be able to be independent with their mobility while another child may work towards pushing their wheelchair 10 feet on their own and another child may work towards holding their head up for activities.

As children mature and enter into adolescence they may experience weight gain that prior to adolescence if they were primarily ambulatory may now require a wheelchair as ambulation may be more of an effort. Taking adolescence into consideration most young adults wish to keep up with their peers—in this case ambulation is recommended but a wheelchair may be required to allow them to keep up with their peers. Also—if ambulation becomes too effortful, especially in the school environment the child may become too fatigued from trying to walk that once they arrive to their class they may be too fatigued to pay attention to their schoolwork/teacher.

Learning to drive, entering into college or the workforce again is a time of fostering independence therefore the PT will consider a seating system to foster that independence. The PT will also take into consideration how a person transfers, their skin integrity and if there are any upcoming orthopedic surgeries scheduled.

The PT in this clinic evaluates the person for manual or power wheelchairs, whichever is appropriate for the person. They take into consideration their past medical history, specifically orthopedic history as well as if there is a history of skin breakdown. During the evaluation process if the PT determines that the person may benefit from another service (outpt Physical Therapy, Occupational Therapy, Speech Therapy, Driving consult or Office of Vocational rehab) she will make that recommendation as well.