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## **Buggies and Wheelchairs for Children with Neurodevelopmental Differences**

### **Buggies and wheelchairs as medical devices**

Westmarc provide buggies and wheelchairs to children who have significant physical difficulties which prevent them from moving around.

When a child has neurodevelopmental differences and no physical difficulty, referrals for a device are received from community professionals because it is perceived that a child:

- Runs off
- Sits and refuses to walk
- Has limited safety awareness

**A buggy or wheelchair is a medical device. It is not always recommended to use a buggy or wheelchair to manage a child's behaviour.**

One of the principles of the United Nations Convention of Rights of a Child (UNRC) clearly states that restraint must only ever be used as a last resort to keep a child safe from harm.

When a child has physical disabilities and also a Neurodevelopmental Difficulty they will be assessed in clinic and provided with a suitable device. Only then will belts and harnesses be considered as part of their postural management.

Prior to making a referral to WestMARC it is assumed that the guidance in this information leaflet has been tried. Only when children's behaviour continues to be particularly challenging, a buggy or wheelchair may be considered following a referral to WestMARC.

In all instances Westmarc will *not* add additional restraint in the form of belts and harnesses.

In all cases, where children are physically able to walk, the best advice is to encourage walking, and always think about what is in the best interests of the child, as well as what the least restrictive option is.

## **Neurodevelopmental Disorders and Buggies**

A Neurodevelopmental diagnosis does not mean that a child needs a specialist buggy or wheelchair. Neurodevelopmental differences such as autism and ADHD can often mean that the child or young person processes and understands the world differently. This means that for some young children their perception and understanding of risk can be different. The way they are processing the sensory world can also be different; they may find joy in sensory experiences such as running, jumping and stimming that maybe don't feel immediately obvious to us. Restricting this can often lead to increased distress, or feeling overwhelmed.

## **Child development**

It is not unusual for children under the age of 5 to:

- Get tired and sit down after periods of walking
- Lie down and become overwhelmed if they can't do what they want to
- Try to run off
- Have limited awareness of danger
- Need a parent to keep them safe

These are NOT reasons why children should have a specialist buggy or wheelchair.

Distressed, passive or unexpected behaviour might be interpreted as 'challenging'. It is important to understand why it occurs.

## **Potential complications of using a buggy or wheelchair**

Using a specialist buggy or wheelchair when there are no physical difficulties can result in:

- Future behaviour difficulties.
- Children will learn that they don't need to walk and can quickly expect to not walk, resulting in more difficult behaviour when encouraging children to walk later on.
- Children with Neurodevelopmental difficulties are often less flexible with changes, therefore it is helpful to get into the habit of walking early on. Clinicians in wheelchair services have seen adults who are still using wheelchairs when they have no physical disability due to the provision of these when they are younger. It is important to think about the future when getting a buggy and planning how the use of this will be progressed.
- Less movement opportunities, limiting sensory experiences throughout the day.
- Poorer muscle strength and stamina due to less opportunity to be active and explore their environment.
- Less opportunity to develop their motor skills. This can have a knock on impact on how children learn to move themselves and use toys and objects in the environment.

## **Benefits to walking**

- Movement opportunities provide a natural part of daily sensory experiences
- Increased muscle strength and stamina
- Learning to stay safe through parent's prompts
- Exercise releases 'happy hormones' so helps children feel better
- Forms good habits for staying safe around roads and listening to adults
- Increased opportunities to develop motor skills

## TIPS

**Please read the top 5 tips from The National Autistic Society on Managing Sensory Differences** [Top 5 autism tips: managing sensory differences](#)

### Other tips:

- Give time to process information and respond. Be aware that people often require more time than others to process and move between different sensory stimuli and can find it extremely difficult to follow rapidly changing social instructions.
- Try a back pack with reins. Add in some weight to help give the child more sensory input. This should be around 5% of a child's body weight. Dried rice weighed and put into a zip lock bag can be useful to try in a back pack.
- Be consistent – always holding a hand or always wearing a back pack with reins should be enforced all the time when out. Visual cue cards to reinforce this will help some children.
- If the child has a younger sibling, buggy boards can help children take a quick break from walking without needing their own buggy or wheelchair.
- Scooters and trikes with handles can offer children more engaging ways to get around without needing a specialist wheelchair.
- Plan ahead – where possible, leave enough time and don't plan long journeys requiring a lot of walking if the child struggles to walk for an extended period of time.
- Use distractions – have favourite toys on you to motivate the child. Sometimes if children become bored, they may start creating their own fun. By having small toys that can be used to distract and keep your child focussed, this can help your child stay with you.
- Some children become overwhelmed in busy, noisy places. This can result in children running to find somewhere quiet. Peaked caps, sunglasses, hoods, ear defenders or music players can help children to cope a little better at these times.
- A child may run to get their parent's attention. It is important to keep track of when a child runs – it may be that a child wants attention, and

running off is a good way to achieve this. If you think your child may be trying to get your attention, it is important to not chase after your child if safe to do so, or if you have to chase, a very low level, 'boring' response is given. As soon as your child is doing something you want them to, react positively to this behaviour.

- Using Maps. Some children become anxious in new environments and may run to check the perimeter of areas. Through using maps in advance, including 'Street View', this can help decrease the need to visually check out areas.

**If you have considered and tried all of the above and still wish to proceed with a referral for a prescribed mobility device, please complete a new referral including clear clinical reasoning for this. Westmarc recommends that if children are to be given a buggy or wheelchair, this has to be age appropriate.**

**Please document on the referral how long the family has been trying to manage the behaviours using the above techniques and guidance.**

If you need additional paper copies of this document please contact Westmarc via:

Westmarc,  
Queen Elizabeth University Hospital,  
1345 Govan Rd, Glasgow  
G51 4TF

Westmarc@ggc.scot.nhs.uk  
Telephone: 0300 790 0129

Suggested reading:

NAIT 2021 Children's Neurodevelopmental Pathway Workbook –

[Children and young people - national neurodevelopmental specification: principles and standards of care - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/publications/children-and-young-people-national-neurodevelopmental-specification/principles-and-standards-of-care/pages/2.aspx)

[Why is occupational therapy important for autistic children? \(autism.org.uk\)](https://www.autism.org.uk/what-is-autism/why-is-occupational-therapy-important-for-autistic-children.aspx)

SIGN 145 Assessment, diagnosis and Interventions for Autism Spectrum Disorders. A National Clinical Guideline

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

<https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/>

Useful contacts for help in managing behaviours associated with autism or ADHD:

**Scottish Autism**

Scottish Autism, Hilton House, Alloa Business Park, Whins Road, Alloa, FK10 3SA

Autism Advice Line: [advice@scottishautism.org](mailto:advice@scottishautism.org). Phone: 01259 720044

**National Autistic Society Scotland**

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77 Renfrew Street

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**Occupational Therapists** in local Child Development Centres