Acquired Brain Injury in Children & Young People: A brief introduction

What is acquired brain injury?

Thousands of children and their families are affected by acquired brain injury every year.

It is often shortened to ‘ABI’. The ‘acquired’ part means simply that the child wasn’t born with their injury – it is the result of an accident or illness that has happened later.

**Acquired brain injury is divided into:**

- **traumatic** brain injury (TBI): the result of an impact to the head. Examples might be a car accident or a fall.
- **non-traumatic** brain injury, which some professionals call ‘atraumatic brain injury’: the result of something like meningitis or a brain tumour.

One way of thinking about it is to say traumatic brain injury is the result of things happening outside the body, such as a blow to the head. Non-traumatic brain injury is the result of things going on inside the body, such as a stroke or a lack of oxygen.

Acquired brain injury in children is sometimes called ‘paediatric acquired brain injury’.

Are children and adults affected differently?

Very much so. Most of us think of children as a work in progress, and the experts agree. The human brain carries on developing until we are in our 20s, and some research suggests it goes on for many years after that.

If part of the brain is injured during the earlier stages of its development, a child might not go on to pick up some of the skills they otherwise would have.

Also, some of the effects might not come to the surface until the injured part starts to be used. In the same way you might not know you had twisted your ankle until you tried to walk on it, an injury to the brain might not make itself known until that part of the brain came ‘on-line’.

Children may make a full physical recovery, but the effects of a brain injury can take weeks, months and sometimes years to come to the surface. It is because these changes and difficulties are hard to spot that ABI is sometimes called ‘the hidden disability’.

Information provided by:

[The Children’s Trust Tadworth](https://www.childrens-trust.co.uk)
What sort of effects are we talking about?

Each child is as unique in the way they respond to a brain injury as they are in every other aspect of their lives.

There is an enormous range of difficulties children might face, from minor short-term memory lapses to serious, long-term physical and learning disabilities.

Some parents talk about a ‘personality change’ as their child’s behaviour alters after the injury, and this can be deeply distressing for parents.

‘Severe acquired brain injury’, which affects a minority of children with acquired brain injury, may mean children permanently lose the ability to walk or talk. Some may have difficulties eating and drinking.

But the majority of children with acquired brain are likely to experience some of the more common effects listed below. It is important to remember each child’s experience is different. You might notice some effects immediately, while some may come to the surface weeks, months or even years later:

- weakness of limbs
- difficulty speaking
- tiredness, struggling with concentration – often talked about as ‘fatigue’ by professionals
- changes in behaviour – irritability, behaving impulsively or inappropriately
- learning difficulties
- problems with memory
- difficulty processing information
- emotional difficulties such as anxiety or depression
- difficulties understanding and using language
- difficulties organising and planning
- difficulty putting themselves ‘in someone else’s shoes’
- wider difficulties that result from all of the above – difficulty keeping up with conversations, carrying out everyday tasks, and coping with school
How is it treated?

The brain is the most sophisticated part of our bodies, and so any injury to it can be equally complex.

There is no single ‘cure’ or treatment for acquired brain injury. But there are opportunities for children to get back some of the skills they have lost through different therapies and support. Physiotherapy, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and many other approaches may have a part to play. This ongoing process is often called ‘rehabilitation’.

Therapy might take place:

- While a child is in hospital. This is called inpatient rehabilitation.
- At a specialist centre of some kind. Children might stay at the centre or visit.
- In the community. Therapists or care staff come to the child’s home, school or a local centre.

How is the rest of the family affected?

Any illness in the family can have an enormous impact. In the case of acquired brain injury, the initial shock can leave families with a great deal of stress. They might also experience feelings of guilt, uncertainty and even post-traumatic stress disorder.

Later on in the healing process, parents and siblings face a distressing time if a child shows changes in their behaviour. Families may feel a sense of loss for the child as they were before the injury. Other children in the family may not fully understand what is happening or may feel left out. It is extremely important that parents remember to look after themselves at this difficult time and seek help and support if they need it. Evidence suggests a supportive family environment can make a positive difference to a child’s recovery.

If you are concerned about anyone in your family, ask your GP to help you find appropriate services.
There seems to be so much uncertainty – how can families know what’s going to happen?

The truth is that nobody has all the answers. The sheer complexity of the brain means even the experts may not know what the outcome will be.

Some children may never be quite the same as they were before the injury. But in all this uncertainty there is also great possibility. The healthcare professionals around you might not be able guarantee a full recovery, but neither can they rule out the dramatic improvements many families have witnessed.

Where can I find more information? Who can help?

**The Children’s Trust, Tadworth** provides care, education, therapy and rehabilitation to children with acquired brain injury.

It is the UK’s largest paediatric brain injury rehabilitation centre, and services include support in the community for children and young people with acquired brain injury.

[www.thechildrenstrust.org.uk](http://www.thechildrenstrust.org.uk)

**The Child Brain Injury Trust** provides non-medical support for families in the form of information and other services on paediatric acquired brain injury.

[www.childbraininjurytrust.org.uk](http://www.childbraininjurytrust.org.uk)

**Headway** and the **Brain Injury Rehabilitation Trust** have extensive information and services for adults, some of which will be relevant to young people.

[www.headway.org.uk](http://www.headway.org.uk)

[www.birt.co.uk](http://www.birt.co.uk)

**The Citizens Advice Bureau** has a great deal of information and advice on finances, parents’ rights in the workplace and access to benefits.

[www.adviceguide.org.uk](http://www.adviceguide.org.uk)

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Information provided by The Children’s Trust, Tadworth. Last updated August 2011. The Children’s Trust Charity Registration 288018. The Children’s Trust, Tadworth Court, Tadworth, Surrey KT20 5RU. Telephone: 01737 365 000. Email: enquiries@thechildrenstrust.org.uk