

Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD)



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What is Developmental Coordination Disorder?

Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD) is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects a child's ability to learn and perform age-appropriate motor skills. Children with DCD often appear "clumsy," have trouble keeping up in physical activities, or struggle with everyday tasks that require coordination.

DCD is **common (5–6% of children)** and lifelong, but children improve significantly with the right supports. It is not caused by muscle disease or lack of effort.

DCD often co-occurs with other developmental conditions such as ADHD, learning disabilities, and speech-language delays.

Common Signs of DCD

Gross Motor Difficulties

- Trouble running, jumping, or participating in sports
- Appears unsteady, bumps into things, easily falls
- Difficulty learning to ride a bike or swim
- Poor balance or endurance

Fine Motor Difficulties

- Difficulty with printing, writing, drawing
- Slow and effortful pencil control
- Trouble using scissors, buttons, zippers, or cutlery
- Messy or slow in completing schoolwork

Daily Living Challenges

- Difficulties dressing independently
- Awkward or inefficient eating/utensil use
- Challenges with organizing belongings
- Avoids tasks that require coordination

School-Related Challenges

- Written work takes much longer than peers
- Fatigue after writing or motor tasks
- Avoidance of PE classes or group games due to frustration

How DCD Is Diagnosed

A diagnosis is made by a physician using four criteria:

1. **Motor skills below what is expected for age**
2. **Difficulties significantly impact daily life** (school, home, or play)
3. **Symptoms begin early in development**
4. **Motor problems are not better explained by another medical or neurological condition**

Occupational therapy and physiotherapy assessments help identify specific motor challenges and functional impacts.

DEVELOPMENTAL COORDINATION DISORDER (DCD)

GROSS MOTOR DIFFICULTIES

- Clumsy, unsteady
- Poor ball skills



FINE MOTOR DIFFICULTIES

- Difficulty with writing
- Trouble using scissors



DAILY LIVING CHALLENGES

- Messy eating
- Problems dressing



SCHOOL-RELATED CHALLENGES

- Delays with written work
- Avoids PE



Why Early Identification Matters

Without support, children with DCD may experience:

- Low confidence and self-esteem
- Academic difficulties
- Avoidance of physical activity
- Anxiety or frustration around motor tasks

Early intervention helps build skills, confidence, and independence.

How You Can Help Your Child

1. Occupational Therapy (OT)

OT is the core treatment for DCD. Therapists help with:

- Fine-motor skills (writing, dressing, scissors)
- Hand strength and pencil grasp
- Self-care skills
- Strategies for independence at school and home

2. Physiotherapy

Helps with:

- Balance and coordination
- Core strength
- Endurance
- Gross motor activities (running, jumping, ball skills)

3. School Accommodations

Schools can support motor learning by providing:

- Extra time for written work
- Reduced copying from the board
- Keyboard use or technology alternatives
- Visual step-by-step instructions
- Modified PE expectations
- Occupational therapy consultation at school

4. At-Home Strategies

- Break tasks into small steps
- Offer extra time without pressure
- Practice in short, frequent sessions
- Use visual checklists (e.g., dressing steps)
- Encourage physical play in a low-pressure environment
- Celebrate effort, not perfection

5. Build Strength and Coordination Through Fun Activities

- Swimming
- Martial arts
- Dancing or rhythmic activities
- Cycling or balance bikes
- Rock climbing (indoor walls)
- Playground play
- Obstacle courses
- Throwing/catching games with soft balls
- Typing practice for writing alternatives

What DCD Is Not

- It is **not** laziness or lack of effort
- It is **not** caused by poor parenting
- It is **not** a muscle disease
- It is **not** something children “grow out of” without help
- It does **not** affect intelligence

Long-Term Outlook

Children with DCD can thrive with:

- Early recognition
- Supportive therapies
- Encouragement to stay active
- A strengths-based approach

Most learn compensatory strategies and grow into independent, capable adults.

Recommended Resources for Parents

Websites

- **CanChild (Canada's leading DCD resource)**
<https://www.canchild.ca/en/diagnoses/developmental-coordination-disorder-dcd>
- **Cerebral Palsy Alberta – Motor difficulties resources**
- **Understood.org – practical tips for school and home**

Books

- **“Helping Children with Dyspraxia” – Maureen Boon**
- **“Developmental Coordination Disorder and Its Consequences” – Kirby & Sugden**
- **“The Out-of-Sync Child”**

When to Seek Further Help

Contact your pediatrician or therapist if you notice:

- Increasing falls or persistent clumsiness
- Difficulties that affect school participation
- Challenges with self-care or independence
- Emotional frustration or avoidance of activities

