

## Developmental Coordination Disorder: What does it mean to me?



*You've been told you that you have "DCD", the short form for "Developmental Coordination Disorder" and you have many questions: What is it? Will it get worse? What can I do about it and where can I turn for help? This flyer will help answer some of your questions about DCD, provide you with helpful tools and resources to manage your coordination challenges and help you be successful...now and in the future!*

### What exactly is Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD)?

Having DCD means that you sometimes have difficulty coordinating the way your body moves. You may think of yourself as "clumsy". DCD can cause problems with the large muscles of your body that you use to run, jump and play sports (also called gross motor coordination). DCD can cause problems with the small muscles you use to tie your shoes or write your name (fine motor coordination). Sometimes both areas can be affected.

DCD can make school activities that require coordination challenging and frustrating, leaving you feeling exhausted. You may have difficulty writing neatly or typing quickly, using scissors, combination locks or handling science equipment. You may find keeping yourself organized, or participating in gym and after-school sports difficult.

You may also have challenges with everyday activities at home. Using a knife and fork to cut food, blow-drying your hair, shaving, flossing your teeth, or putting pierced earrings in. Your leisure and social life may be affected by DCD. It may be difficult for you to skateboard, play team sports (especially those involving balls), respond quickly to your friends by text messaging, or get yourself neatly dressed and "put together".

Doctors or psychologists decide that coordination difficulties are DCD when the motor problems affect your schoolwork and your ability to take care of yourself. This doesn't mean that you won't be able to do well in school...it's just that you may have to work harder or differently than your friends to achieve your goals. Your doctor might have ordered some medical tests or made an appointment with a specialist before deciding that you have DCD. This is to make sure that nothing else is causing your coordination challenges. It's important to know that DCD is NOT contagious and it won't get any worse. Most adults who have DCD do very well because they have learned to find a way around their motor difficulties and have developed other strengths.

## Why Me?

It's not just you! At least 5% of people your age have DCD. More boys have DCD than girls. We don't know what causes DCD. Is it something in your genes? Maybe. Did something affect your development before or after you were born? Perhaps. Is it "how you are wired" and how you learn motor tasks? Probably. Most likely, DCD is caused by many factors. The most important thing to think about is...What can you do to help yourself do well and be successful?

## M.A.T.C.H. STRATEGY FOR ADOLESCENTS WITH DCD

When you were young, you probably depended on adults to help you with difficult tasks. Your mother may have tied your shoes or packed your backpack. Your teacher may have written your homework in your agenda and made sure that all of the right books went home. Your parents may have encouraged you to take swimming lessons rather than play soccer.

As an adolescent, you want to become independent, and solve problems on your own. When faced with a challenging task, it may be helpful to think about strategies that help **M.A.T.C.H.** the activity that you are trying to do with your abilities. You might try changing the task, the environment or what you expect from yourself. You might begin to try out some strategies and help people (your family, teachers, coaches, friends) to understand more about your difficulties. Let's review these strategies and then try out a few examples.

### **M**odify the task

Try changing the parts of the task that are difficult. For example, wear slip-on shoes instead of shoes with laces...for most tasks there is often more than one way to get the job done!

### **A**lter your expectations

Be realistic when you set expectations for yourself. When faced with an activity that is difficult, ask yourself: Is this something I *need to be able to do? have to do? really want to do?* If the answer is "yes", consider the end goal and think about where you can be flexible. Give yourself extra time or choose another way to complete the task.

### **T**ry new strategies

Don't give up! If one strategy doesn't work, try another. Ask others to help you come up with a strategy. A big part of being independent is **knowing when to ask for help.**

### **C**hange the environment

Pay attention to what is going on around you when you are having success or difficulty (such as noise, other distractions) and change the environment when necessary.

### **H**elp yourself and others to understand

Understanding DCD and how it affects you will help you solve problems and speak up for yourself. Help others understand why having DCD makes things difficult for you, and the strategies and solutions that work for you.

## Let's try some M.A.T.C.H. strategies for tasks that may be challenging:

**Completing Homework:** DCD can affect your ability to write as well as your ability to plan and organize yourself. Doing homework can be frustrating and exhausting after a long school day. Here are some M.A.T.C.H. strategies that may make homework completion easier:

- ✓ Break long-term assignments into chunks (e.g., research, outline, rough draft), recording on a calendar or daily agenda when you are going to complete each chunk of work.
- ✓ Ask your teacher for a copy of class notes to study from for tests and exams.
- ✓ Use one large binder with dividers for all subjects rather than separate binders. Choose a binder that zips up to help keep loose papers from falling out.
- ✓ Search the Internet for pictures to paste into your work if you have difficulty drawing.
- ✓ Consider where you work best: At the kitchen table with the noise of the television and meal preparation in the background? In your room with the door closed and music playing? or perhaps you work best in total silence?

**Personal Care:** Having DCD can affect your ability to care for yourself (e.g., wash your hair, use a blow dryer, shave with a razor, apply makeup). Looking “put together” before you leave home may be a challenge. Let's look at some M.A.T.C.H. strategies that may help:

- ✓ Consider an easy to manage hairstyle and a mirror in the shower so you can “see” when you are shampooing and rinsing.
- ✓ Try an electric razor, which is less likely to cut you and use shaving cream to see where you have shaved.
- ✓ Ask family or a trusted friend to give you a “final check” before leaving the house.

**After-School Activities:** Competitive sports can be challenging if you have DCD but it's important to find enjoyable ways to keep both your mind and body active. The following M.A.T.C.H. strategies may help you keep your social and recreational life active and healthy:

- ✓ Individual sports like golfing, skiing, martial arts or swimming are great options. A few individual lessons from a qualified instructor can make a huge difference when you are first learning.
- ✓ Check out the exercise room at your school or local fitness club. A teacher or instructor can teach you how to use the equipment safely and set realistic goals for yourself.
- ✓ Most schools offer a range of extracurricular activities in addition to sports. What is your passion? Social justice? Music? Environmental Issues? Photography? Joining a group that shares your passion is a great way to meet friends, have fun and use your talents.

**Social Relationships:** Having DCD can affect your social relationships. You may have difficulty doing some things that others find very easy. You may be embarrassed to share your difficulties with friends and classmates. Let's look at some M.A.T.C.H. strategies to help you manage your social relationships:

- ✓ When eating out, order finger foods to avoid the need for a knife and fork. Communicate your challenges with this task with your friend – they will likely be more than willing to help you out!
- ✓ Be creative with group social events. Offer to be the scorekeeper or referee at a sporting game. Research movie times or make suggestions for restaurant options after an activity. That way you can still be part of the activity, but in a role in which you are comfortable and for which you have the skills.
- ✓ Help your friends understand DCD and how it affects you. Good friends will want to know how they can support and help you. There are probably things that they will need your help with too...like math, proofreading their essay or listening to them when they have a problem.

Adolescence is an exciting and challenging life stage. You are changing from being a dependent person to an independent person. DCD can make some of life's daily expectations and social relationships even more of a challenge. When you come across a difficult task, activity or situation that you want to do, need to do or are expected to do, remember to M.A.T.C.H.!!

**For more information about DCD, visit the *CanChild* website:  
[www.canchild.ca](http://www.canchild.ca)**

**Sandra Sahagian-Whalen, MHS, OT Reg. (Ont.)**  
Managing Associate,  
REACH Therapy Services  
[sandrasw@shaw.ca](mailto:sandrasw@shaw.ca)

**Cheryl Missiuna, Ph.D., OT Reg. (Ont.)**  
Professor, School of Rehabilitation Science  
Director, *CanChild*  
[missiuna@mcmaster.ca](mailto:missiuna@mcmaster.ca)

**Lisa Rivard, MSc, BSc (PT)**  
*CanChild* Centre for Childhood Disability Research  
[lrivard@mcmaster.ca](mailto:lrivard@mcmaster.ca)