

Early intervention is key with disabilities

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February 16, 2010

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Call it the firecracker look.

Two silky pigtails exploding from either side of Olivia McCann's head suit her well.

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Olivia McCann is hitting developmental milestones of any child her age, despite being born with Downs syndrome. Her mother, Beata, credits therapies from Westchester-based Aspire. (Brian Valentin/Staff Photographer)

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Olivia McCann, 18 months, takes charge of her toys at her Western Springs home. (Brian Valentin/Staff Photographer)

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Developmental delays

That delayed walking is the most visible indication of that condition. Children with Down syndrome generally have poor muscle tone that affects walking and other motor skills, difficulties with physical coordination and delayed language development, among other issues noted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Down syndrome, the result of an extra chromosome formed accidentally as a fetus grows, occurs in 13 of every 10,000 babies born each year in the U.S., according to CDC.

But other than delayed walking, said McCann, "Olivia's pretty much on track."

Early intervention, a combination of therapies and treatments begun in infancy, is one of the most powerful tools available for helping children with Down syndrome and other developmental disabilities.

"We work with families to give them strategies to help their child develop their abilities to the fullest," said Paula Cox, manager of clinical therapy services at Aspire, a Westchester-based organization that provides services for children and adults with disabilities and their families.

Down syndrome affects every child differently. Some children, like Olivia, will be highly functional, while others will always have severe difficulties. Professionals must regularly evaluate these children and tailor programs to fit their needs.

Olivia, working with Cox since she was 2 months old, has had a variety of physical, speech and occupational therapies.

Cox also teaches the child's parents ways to work with their child at home.

"We give parents strategies that will work for the child they have," said Cox.

The bright-eyed Western Springs toddler is ready for adventure and often on the move, no matter that walking is not yet her strong suit.

At 18 months, Olivia's hitting the developmental milestones expected from any child her age.

She has at least five words, has a healthy appetite, and attends daycare the few hours each week her mother

works at a part-time accounting job. Olivia adores her older sister, Ella, almost 3, and brother, Andy, who'll be 5 in May.

"They go running around the house, she follows. They dump out their toys, she's dumping too," said her mother, Beata McCann. "Whatever they're doing, she's in the middle of it."

Olivia also has Down syndrome.

Such strategies might be as simple as placing the baby on her tummy, which encourages her to lift her head to look around, and strengthens neck muscles that are weaker in Down syndrome children.

Parents help

Ideally those strategies become part of the child's daily routine. Once parents know what will help, they can create opportunities for their child to do what's needed.

At about 9 months, Olivia began speech therapy, which pleased McCann.

"I want her to be able to talk as clearly and as well as she possibly can," she said.

Though Olivia obviously couldn't talk then, Cox helped her work the muscles involved in creating speech. She also taught Olivia sign language as a back-up method of communication. She'll continue to learn sign language until she's got a solid grounding in speech and is using it full time.

"It's a lot easier to say something than to sign it," notes Cox.

Learning what it means to parent a child with disabilities is not easy.

"I had no idea what early intervention was, no idea what we were entitled to from the state or where to start," McCann recalled.

A nurse from Aspire guided her through the calls and paperwork.

"She also told me what I could expect developmentally and health-wise," said McCann.

Olivia will continue therapy at Aspire until she's 3. Then she moves into the public school system, which will provide therapy and education until she's 21, though she can stay with Aspire for supplemental services.

Meanwhile, because McCann sees how today's therapies and treatments are helping Olivia and offering her brighter future, she'd like to spread a word of hope.

"That's the message I want to get out," she said. "It's not the worst thing in the world to have a child with Down syndrome."

Contact Aspire at (708) 547-3558, or online at <http://aspireofillinois.org>.