

Children's Therapy Connection Newsletter

Summer
2025

Volume 29
Issue 3



In this issue:

- Back-to-School Tips for Parents of Children with Special Needs.....1, 5
- CTC Stars..... 2
- Physical Therapy... 3
- Occupational Therapy.....4-5
- Speech Therapy.....6
- Miss Sara's OT Corner.....7
- New staff.....8
- Touch A Truck.....8
- CTC Information..... 9

Back-to-School Tips for Parents of Children with Special Needs

By: Jenna Baer, Family Resource Coordinator

A new school year means a new grade, new teachers, new goals, or maybe even a new school. To help you and your child with special needs, here is a list of helpful back-to-school tips to help make the new school year a little easier.

Organize All That Paperwork

In the world of special education, there are a lot of meetings, paperwork, and documentation. Try to keep a family calendar of school events, special education meetings, conferences, and other activities. Setting up a binder or folder to organize your child's documentation, meeting notices, and IEPs in sequential order can help put important papers at your fingertips.

Start a Communication Log

Keeping track of all phone calls, e-mails, notes or school memos, meetings, and conferences is important. Create a "communication log" for yourself in a notebook that is easily accessible. Be sure to note the dates, times, and nature of the communications you have. As an additional tip: keep this notebook inside the binder mentioned in the above tip.

Review Your Child's Current IEP

The IEP is the cornerstone of your child's educational program, so it's important that you have a clear understanding of it. Note when the IEP expires and if your child is up for reevaluation this year. Most importantly, be sure that this IEP still "fits" your child's needs. If you're unsure, contact the school about holding an IEP review meeting.

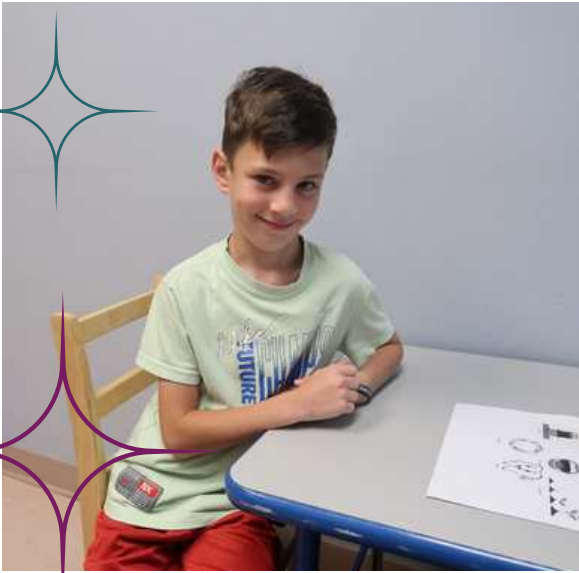
Relieve Back-to-School Jitters

Just talking about the upcoming year and changes can help reduce some of that back-to-school anxiety. Talk to your child about exciting new classes, activities, and events that they can participate in during the new school year. If attending a new school, try to schedule a visit before the first day. With older students, it is sometimes helpful to explain the services and accommodations in their IEP so that they know what to expect when school begins.

Continued on page 5



CTC Superstars



Jonah

Jonah is a Speech Superstar. When Jonah first started speech therapy, it was hard for others to understand him—but now, everyone can clearly understand everything he says. Jonah has worked incredibly hard to learn his speech sounds and use them consistently. He comes to speech each week eager to learn and have fun. He loves creating his own games. You never know what direction a session will take, but we always end up laughing. We're all so proud of how far he's come and can't wait to celebrate his graduation after he masters just a few more sounds.



Reagan

Reagan is our PT Superstar. Reagan has been working incredibly hard in physical therapy and is getting so strong. She's now taking four steps independently, walking through the halls with only the support of a walker, and making great progress on the stairs. Her endurance has improved significantly—she's now able to stay on her feet for the entire session, both in the clinic and in the pool. We're so proud of Reagan. We're also grateful for her supportive parents, grandmother, and sister, who are always there to cheer her on during therapy.

Hope

Hope is our OT Superstar. She is such a hard worker and has made great progress with her cutting and coloring skills. She is also putting in effort to improve her color recognition. Hope's fine motor and visual motor skills have come a long way. Over the past year, her fun and sassy personality has really blossomed. She continues to be a joy to work with, and Miss Sara is very proud of all her hard work.



Physical Therapy

Is Crawling Important for My Baby's Development?

By: Miss Jaimie, PT, DPT

Watching your baby grow and develop new skills can be one of the most fun parts of being a parent. Many parents may wonder if their child is progressing with gross motor skills on time. Developmental milestones have been established as a way of knowing what skills a child should develop, and when should you expect them to happen.

Crawling is often a child's first form of independent mobility, allowing them to explore and navigate the world around them. It may begin as belly or army crawling, where the stomach stays in contact with the ground and the child pulls themselves forward using their arms. Some children may skip army crawling altogether and move directly to reciprocal crawling on hands and knees.

There are so many benefits to crawling.

- **Improves coordination:** The right and left sides of the body work together to crawl, which stimulates communication between both hemispheres of the brain.
- **Increases strength of hips, core, and shoulders:** The muscles of the hip and shoulder joints develop stability, which is setting the child up for success with walking and progression of fine motor skills in the upright position. Strengthening the core is important for postural control in both sitting and standing.
- **Enhances the sensory systems:** Crawling increases body awareness, provides important sensory experiences by moving across different textures and environments, and increases a sense of depth perception and hand-eye coordination.

All of these benefits of crawling help to set your child up for success with future skills like walking, running, jumping, self-feeding, and writing.

Common Questions

When should my baby crawl?

Babies typically learn to crawl between 7 and 10 months old.

What if my baby is not crawling, or instead of crawling is scooting on their bottom or crawling asymmetricaly?

Speak to your pediatrician about getting evaluated with a physical therapist. They may benefit from being assessed to determine the cause. If a baby has muscle weakness, decreased flexibility, asymmetrical strength, or difficulty with coordination crossing midline this could lead to delayed crawling.

When is the best time to initiate physical therapy?

Early intervention is key. The sooner services can be initiated, the sooner a physical therapist can teach you how to encourage crawling at home. The eventually helps your child gain all of the benefits of crawling for optimal development.

What can I do at home to encourage crawling?

Allow your baby to have plenty of time on the floor during awake time, especially on their tummy. The floor or another safe, flat surface is the ideal place for your child to build strength, develop mobility, and explore their surroundings. Try to limit time spent in devices like bouncers, chairs, and swings, as they can restrict movement and reduce opportunities for development.

Resources

"Why Crawling Is Important for Your Baby." Nationwide Children's Hospital, <https://www.nationwidechildrens.org/family-resources-education/700childrens/2016/11/why-crawling-is-important-for-your-baby>

"Crawling is Important for Childhood Brain Development." The Functional Neurology Center, <https://thefnc.com/research/crawling-is-important-for-childhood-brain-development/>

Occupational Therapy

Food Chaining

By: Miss Sofia, OT Student - University of Pittsburgh

What is Food Chaining?

Food chaining is a therapeutic strategy used to help children with limited food preferences gradually expand the variety of foods they eat. Rather than forcing unfamiliar foods, this process introduces new foods that are similar in taste, texture, shape, or appearance to foods the child already eats comfortably. Food chaining can help to reduce anxiety, support sensory processing differences, and build trust at mealtimes.

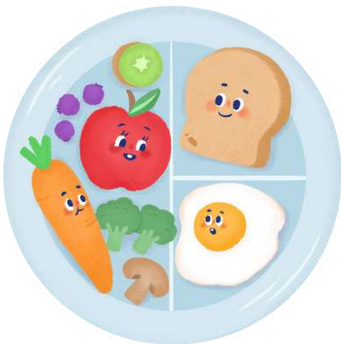
Food chaining is especially effective for children who:

- Eat a limited number of foods
- Struggle with food textures, colors, or temperatures
- Experience anxiety around trying new foods
- Have sensory sensitivities or oral motor delays

Why Use Food Chaining?

Children who are picky eaters often experience discomfort—not just refusal—when faced with unfamiliar foods. Food chaining respects a child's boundaries while gently encouraging progress. The goal is to:

- Reduce pressure at mealtimes
- Create positive food experiences
- Support sensory regulation
- Encourage long-term dietary variety



What Food Chaining Looks Like

Let's say your child's preferred food is store-bought chicken nuggets. A food chain might look like:

1. Start with their accepted chicken nugget brand
2. Transition to a different brand with similar taste and texture
3. Offer homemade baked chicken nuggets in a similar shape
4. Introduce lightly breaded or unbreaded baked chicken tenders
5. Offer grilled chicken strips with familiar dipping sauce
6. Add grilled or shredded chicken in a quesadilla or sandwich

Each step in the chain is intentional, based on a predictable and gradual change from the original food. Another Example:



How Parents Can Begin Food Chaining at Home

Here are some practical tips for starting food chaining in your own kitchen:

Identify accepted foods

Make a list of your child's safe or preferred foods. Note specific brands, shapes, textures, and preparation methods.

Food Chaining

Continued from page 5

Find patterns

Does your child prefer crunchy foods? Soft textures? Mild flavors? Uniform shapes? Finding these patterns will help guide your chaining choices.

Plan gradual steps

Choose one food and find a similar version that is slightly different—this might be a new shape, flavor, or texture. Do not make drastic changes.

Serve new foods alongside safe foods

Present the new item without pressure. Exposure alone (even without tasting) is valuable.

Stay calm and neutral

Avoid bribing, coaxing, or showing frustration. Encourage interaction with the new food (touching, smelling, licking) without insisting on bites.

Celebrate small wins

Progress may be slow, but consistent exposure leads to lasting changes in food acceptance.

When to Seek Professional Help

Your child may benefit from a feeding evaluation by an occupational therapist or speech-language pathologist with feeding experience if they:

- Eat fewer than 20 foods
- Eliminate entire food groups (e.g., no fruits or vegetables)
- Gag, vomit, or experience distress with new foods
- Have a history of prematurity, feeding tube use, or oral aversion
- Have difficulty chewing or swallowing safely

Back-to-School Tips for Parents of Children with Special Needs

Continued from page 1

Routine, Routine, Routine

It's crucial to discuss the routine that will happen once school starts. You can even begin practicing your new schedule, focusing on morning and evening routines, and begin implementing them well in advance of the first day of school.

Stay Up-to-Date on Special Education News

Being knowledgeable about your child's IEP and their disability can help you become a better advocate for your child. Try to keep up-to-date on new special education legislation, news, and events. The more you know, the more prepared you will be to navigate the world of special education and successfully advocate for your child.

Attend school events

Take advantage of open house, back-to-school night, and parent-teacher conferences to help you and your child get a feel for the school and meet the teachers, other staff, students, and families. Share the positives about working with your child, and let the teacher know about changes, events, or IEP concerns that should be considered for your child.

For any questions about the new school year, your child's IEP or 504 plan, or community resources, please contact your CTC Family Resource Coordinator, Jenna Baer baerj3@upmc.edu or 724-942-6145.

Speech Therapy

Phonological Awareness Skills: what are they and how to work on them.

By: Miss Marcie MS, CCC/SLP

Phonological awareness is the ability to recognize and manipulate sounds in spoken words. These skills are the foundation for reading development. Phonological awareness includes a variety of skills that are listed below in order of development. Each will be described and ideas on how to work on them with your child.

Concept of spoken word (sentence segmentation)

This is the ability to identify whole words in sentences. To target this skill, you can start with saying a few words and work towards longer sentences. You can use any item laid out in a row to tap on for each word or clap them out.

Rhyme recognition

This is the ability to identify rhyming words. You can use pictures or state the words emphasizing the endings to have your child say if they rhyme or not.

Rhyming production

This is being able to create rhymes. Provide a word and have the child generate a rhyming word. Encourage them to create their own sets of rhyming words. Emphasize the word endings and experiment by adding different beginning sounds—for example: op, mop, hop.

Syllable blending

This involves blending syllables to form a word. Say each syllable separately, and have the child combine them to produce the complete word. For example: 'pa' and 'per' become 'paper'.

Syllable segmentation

Next, focus on segmenting words into syllables—the opposite of blending. Say a word and have the child identify its syllables. For example, you say 'paper,' and the child responds with 'pa-per'.

Syllable Deletion

Have the child focus on removing part of a multi-syllable word and identifying what remains. For example, say 'airplane' and ask the child to say the word without 'air.' The correct response would be 'plane'.

Isolation of initial sounds

Ask the child to identify the first sound in a word—for example, 'bite.' The expected response is the /b/ sound, not the letter 'B.' If the child says the letter, acknowledge it and then guide them to focus on the sound.

Isolation of final sounds

Use the same instructions as isolation of initial sound, but have the child identify the last sound, i.e.: bite /t/.

Phoneme blending

This involves blending sounds together to form words. You would sound out mat as /m/ /ae/ /t/ and the child would say 'mat.'

Phoneme segmentation

The opposite of blending is phoneme segmentation. You say the word and have the child break down the sounds. State 'mat' and they say /m/ /a/ /t/.

Phoneme deletion of initial sounds and final sounds

Say 'tape' without saying /t/, 'ape'. For final position you would say 'tape' without the /p/ sound, like 'ta'. You can also work on deletion of the first sound in a consonant blend. Say 'clap' with /k/ 'lap'.

Phoneme Substitution

This skill involves changing sounds in words to create new ones. For example, replace the first sound in 'Mike' with /b/ to make 'bike.' You can also change sounds in the middle or at the end of words.

There are many phonological awareness apps and games available online. Just search for 'phonological awareness apps or games' and choose one that fits your needs.

Miss Sara's OT Activity Corner

Sensational Summer

Summer is winding down. Here are a few outdoor activities you can do with your kids to promote their OT skills.

Activity 1: 'Box Cake' Painting

For this activity, put those empty shipping boxes to good use. Stack up several boxes and secure together with tape. Then prepare washable paint and paint brushes. This fun activity can address grasp skills, visual, and fine motor skills.



Activity 2: Graffiti Art

Materials needed:

- Roll of craft paper, tape
- Paint
- Spray bottle and water

Tape craft paper to a vertical surface like a wall or fence. Fill a spray bottle with a small amount of paint and dilute with water. Let the child spray the paper and enjoy! This activity supports hand strength, bilateral coordination, and color recognition.



Activity 3: Outdoor Road

This easy activity only requires painter's tape and toy cars or trucks. Place the tape on a flat surface like concrete or a deck and let the fun begin. It helps develop eye-hand coordination, upper body strength, and fine motor skills. This is great for indoor play on rainy days, too.



Activity 4: Flower Sensory Bin

This two-in-one activity starts with gathering and cutting flowers from the yard. Then, fill a large bin with water and add the flowers. For added fun, give your child spoons or cups to scoop and pour. This supports sensory processing, bilateral coordination, cutting skills, and ADL skills like scooping and pouring.



Children should be supervised when completing these activities for safety purposes.

WELCOME

New Staff Member



Welcome Miss Stacey
Physical Therapy

Stacey is a licensed physical therapist. She grew up in Washington County and a graduate of Chartiers-Houston High School. She earned her Bachelor of Science in Molecular Biology from Grove City College in 2006, where she played NCAA Division III soccer and held records for assists and goals. In 2009, she received her Doctor of Physical Therapy degree from the University of Pittsburgh.

After graduation, Stacey married a U.S. Naval Academy graduate and embraced the military lifestyle, living and working in Virginia, California, Illinois, and Pennsylvania.

She has experience in early intervention, inpatient, school-based, and outpatient physical therapy settings.

Outside of work, Stacey enjoys spending time with her husband and five children. Together, they love the outdoors, exploring new places, and playing sports. She's excited to join the CTC team and looks forward to supporting local families and children.

Sensory Friendly Touch A Truck at CTC!



No lights, sirens, or moving parts on these vehicles.
Small crowds will allow all of the children to
enjoy this special event.

Where: Children's Therapy Center - McMurray location
1000 Waterdam Plaza Drive

When: Saturday, Sept. 6th

Time: 10:00 a.m. - noon

724-942-6100

Information

Freedom Transit



Families of CTC may be eligible for reimbursement of travel costs to the Children's Therapy Center. If your child receives Medical Assistance call 1-800-331-5058 to inquire whether you qualify for this service.

To view the reimbursement form:

https://www.freedom-transit.org/forms/MATP-Reimbursement-Form-5_26_16.pdf

Free Diapers, Pull-ups and Wipes

Where: The Diaper Pantry
Peters Creek Baptist Church
6300 Library Rd., South Park

When: Every 3rd Saturday of the month

Time: 9:00 a.m. to noon

Other Donations Provided: New and gently used baby/children's clothing, baby equipment, toys, etc.

Contact Information:

DIAPERPANTRY@PCBC.CHURCH and found on Facebook.



Follow us on social media
[facebook.com/UPMCWashington](https://www.facebook.com/UPMCWashington)

CTC is proud to partner with



United Way
of Washington County



Health Insurance

Reminder: If your child's health insurance has changed, please inform us.



UPMC

WASHINGTON

CHILDREN'S THERAPY

Office locations:

1000 Waterdam Plaza Drive,
Suite 120
McMurray, PA 15317

289 North Avenue.
Washington, PA 15301