

# Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)

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## WHAT IS TBI?

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A traumatic brain injury disrupts the normal functioning of the brain. A bump, a blow, or a jolt to the head can cause a TBI. With the brain still developing, a child is especially at risk for long-term effects from a TBI. Brain injuries occur most often from motor vehicle accidents, gunshot wounds, and falls resulting in long-term deficits in how the person acts, moves, and thinks. Long after the broken bones and body have healed on the outside, the child's brain has not, causing changes that are hard to understand, especially when he returns to school. The term TBI is not used for a person who is born with a brain injury, or sustained brain injury during birth.



## SIGNS OF TBI

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The signs of TBI can vary from person to person depending on the severity of the injury and what parts of the brain were affected since each controls a different function of the body, including personality.

### **Physical disabilities:**

Includes problems speaking, seeing, hearing, and using other senses, like taste and smell. They may

have headaches and fatigue. They may have trouble with writing or drawing skills. They have a heightened sensitivity to light or noise. They may have seizures, sudden contraction of muscles, and difficulty with balance, coordination, walking, or become partly or completely paralyzed on one side of the body.

### **Cognitive (thinking) disabilities:**

Children with TBI may have trouble with short-term memory, and not able to remember something from one minute to the next. Difficulty learning new material. Difficulty with word-finding. They may have trouble using long-term memory, from a while ago, such as facts learned last month. Children may have trouble concentrating and unable to focus attention for very long. They may think slowly (processing speed) and have trouble talking and listening to others. Children may find it hard to read, write, plan ahead, organize, and understand the order in which events happen (sequence.)

### **Social, behavior, or emotional problems:**

They may be unable to deal with daily changes in the environment or daily routine; have little or no expressed emotion; depression; irritability, and inability to deal with unexpected events. Children with TBI may have trouble relating to others and maintaining friendships. They may lose control over their emotions by crying or laughing inappropriately.

Brain injuries can be mild to severe, and so can the changes resulting from the injury. This means that it is difficult to predict how the child will recover



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from the injury, but early and continuous help consisting of physical or occupational therapy, counseling, and education can make a big difference.

## Definition of Traumatic Brain Injury

The Alabama Administrative Code, defines traumatic brain injury as....

Traumatic brain injury means an acquired injury to the brain caused by an external physical force, resulting in total or partial functional disability or psychosocial impairment, or both, that adversely affects a child's educational performance.

Traumatic brain injury applies to open or closed head injuries resulting in impairments in one or more areas, such as cognition; language; memory; attention; reasoning; abstract thinking; judgment; problem-solving; sensory, perceptual, and motor abilities; psychosocial behavior; physical functions; information processing; and speech. The term does not apply to brain injuries that are congenital or degenerative, or to brain injuries induced by birth trauma.

*AAC 290-8-9.03(12)(a)*

## PLANNING A RETURN TO SCHOOL

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Parental involvement is critical when a young person is returning to school after a traumatic brain injury. Parents have the most knowledge about their child, are deeply invested in their child's well-being and future, and therefore the

most logical advocates to ensure that all essential supports are in place to enhance the child's successful return to school. The child's friends and teachers might recall what the child was like before the injury, and now have trouble changing or adjusting their expectations of the child. Learning, behavioral, and social problems can emerge over time as school demands increase. Schools play an important role in managing TBI. The more educators know about TBI, the better they will be able to support students with TBI at school.

## INITIAL EVALUATION

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It is important to plan carefully for the child's return to school, including meeting with the school to discuss having the child evaluated to determine their need for possible special education services. A medical diagnosis does not automatically qualify a child eligible for services. The initial evaluation will provide information to assist you and the evaluation team to determine where your child is educationally performing and what educational supports they need to benefit from classroom instruction.

Each local school district must develop and use procedures to identify and evaluate children suspected of having a disability that has a negative impact on their learning and performance in the classroom, and therefore needs special education and related services. There are required minimum evaluations to be used on the child before determining eligibility in one of thirteen qualifying disability categories, and the school team may also determine if other assessments are needed. (AAC



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290-8-9.03) Vision and hearing screenings should be the first assessments conducted for all children suspected of having a disability.

For a child with brain injury, there must be documentation of a traumatic brain injury, and evidence that the injury adversely affects educational performance. To meet this criteria, you should share with the school any medical or neuropsychological testing reports. The school will conduct an individual educational achievement evaluation to serve as initial post-trauma baseline measure. The most common type is a standardized test designed to measure skills and knowledge learned in a given grade level through classroom instruction. Parents must provide their written consent for the school to conduct the evaluation. The school has 60 calendar days from receipt of your signed consent, to administer individual assessments and complete the evaluation process. Then, the school has 30 days from completion of the evaluation, to review the data and determine eligibility. If a parent disagrees with the evaluation, they may request an IEE (Independent Educational Evaluation) to be conducted by someone qualified outside the school district, at no cost to the parent. A copy of the eligibility report, including the evaluation data, must be given to the parent at no cost.

A meeting of the IEP team, including parents, must be held within 30 calendar days of the eligibility determination to discuss what the child needs and develop the IEP (individualized education program.) Before the school can provide special education and related services for the first time, the parents must give consent. Services should

begin without delay. The IEP is a flexible document and can be changed as the school, parent, and student learn more about what the student needs at school. If the child is determined ineligible, parents have the right to disagree with this decision, and request a hearing.



## TIPS FOR PARENTS

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- Learn more about TBI. The more you know, the more you can help yourself and your child.
- Work with the medical team to understand your child's injury and treatment plan. Ask questions.
- Keep track of your child's treatment by using a 3-ring binder. As your child recovers, you will meet with numerous doctors, nurses, and therapists, so write down what they say and keep the papers they give. The papers may not make sense now, but in time you'll have the chance to go back and review them when you are not so stressed. Make copies to share if you need to, but never give away your original document.



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- Talk to other parents whose children have TBI. Join a parent support group in your area to share practical advice and emotional support.
- If your child was in school before the injury, plan their return by getting in touch with the school and asking about special education services available. Have your medical team share information with the school.
- When your child returns to school, ask them to test your child as soon as possible to identify his or her special education needs. Be a part of the team to develop a plan for your child.
- Keep in touch with your child's teacher and tell her how the child is doing at home, and ask how he's doing at school.

## OTHER PLANS TO CONSIDER

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In addition to special education services for students who have persistent symptoms or more significant learning or behavioral challenges, here are other plans your student may be eligible for:

### 504 Plans

A 504 Plan may include modified classes, physical accommodations like automatic door openers, or assistive technology, such as a keyboard for taking notes.

### School-Based Health Services

A school-based health plan can be completed when the student first returns to school. It is written and coordinated by the school nurse to describe health-related issues that impact learning. Some schools may provide customized case management, mental health services, referrals, and medication management through school nursing services.

## RESOURCES

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Ala Dept of Education, Special Education Services <https://www.alsde.edu/sec/ses/Pages/home.aspx>

Alabama Head Injury Foundation [www.ahif.org](http://www.ahif.org)

Children's Rehabilitation Service TBI Program [www.rehab.alabama.gov/crs](http://www.rehab.alabama.gov/crs)

Ala Dept of Rehabilitation Services, Traumatic Brain Injury Program <http://www.rehab.alabama.gov/individuals-and-families/vocational-rehabilitation-service-general/traumatic-brain-injury-program>

Ala Early Intervention "Child Find," Birth-Age 2 <http://www.rehab.alabama.gov/individuals-and-families/early-intervention>

UAB TBI Model Systems <http://www.uab.edu/medicine/tbi/>

## YOUR OPINION MATTERS

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**Stakeholder opinion** is very important to our center. We invite you tell us what you think and make suggestions for trainings and publications. Complete a brief survey, call our center, or join our advisory committee. Your input is always welcome. <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/ALPT>

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## APEC IS HERE TO HELP

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