

JUST A
LITTLE BIT
MORE
EACH DAY

For Parents and Caregivers:

PAIN AND FUNCTION

How daily activity helps kids with chronic pain

What does pain have to do with “functioning?”

When doctors say someone needs to improve “daily function” they mean they want kids to return to their typical day-to-day activities like **going to school, being active with friends and family, and doing the sports and activities they like to do.**

Most families hope that doctors will be able to first make the pain go away with medications or other treatments before their child returns to doing the things they want and need to do. Oh how we all wish! Many (if not most!) people are pretty surprised to learn that it (**VERY** unfortunately) doesn't work that way. The push for functioning does not mean doctors don't believe your child. Your child's pain experience is real, and this is a **very important** part of the plan to help them feel better.

Why do doctors often say, “Function improves before pain improves”?

It turns out it's about science. Chronic or ongoing pain often leads to resting and doing less activity. Over time, this rest can actually make your child feel **more tired** which means they **lose strength and endurance**. This often makes pain worse. In order to get more energy and strength, kids have to start little by little to do more activity. When this is done with the right supports in place, they start to build back endurance and get stronger. This process “re-trains” their body and their brain, and this helps decrease pain over time.

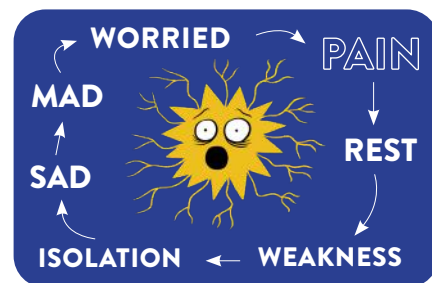
How can you improve function when you still have pain?

We know it's not easy, but it is possible! Having kids decide on their own **small goals** is the best way to break the cycle of pain and low function. Kids can build strength and gain energy by doing **just a little bit more every day**. Making step-by-step goals can help them stay on track. Having them measure their progress on a chart or using an app or fitness tracker can help them stay motivated and make it clear how much they are improving. Rewards can help with motivation too, so always be sure to **celebrate small victories!**

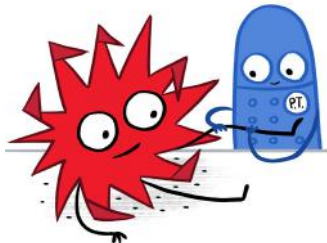
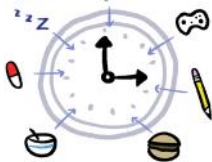
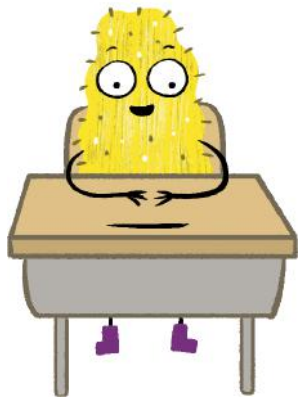
How can better function help with mood?

Pain can cause kids to miss out on their usual activities so they can rest. Two things often happen next: **1) They get lonely and feel isolated from friends** and **2) They miss out on the joy and enjoyment of actually doing them.** All of this affects a person's mood. Getting back to activities like school, sports, or hobbies helps kids reconnect with people, feel better about themselves, and helps to improve mood.

CHRONIC PAIN CYCLE



To break this cycle, it's helpful to reduce rest and slowly increase activity. This leads to better strength, more time with friends and family, better mood, improved functioning, and less pain.



For more in this series:



HELPFUL TIPS!



Follow a schedule.

Having your child set a regular daily schedule helps their mind and body adjust to changes and makes it easier for them to meet their goals. Scheduling a time for exercise makes it much more likely it will happen. Be sure they include times in the schedule for other important habits such as **eating regular meals, drinking plenty of water, spending time with friends, and getting enough sleep.**

(Check out the sleep handout for more info!)

Pro Tip: We know it's not what they want to hear, but going to bed and waking up at the same time is really important for good sleep.



Encourage them to move their body.

Remember that it takes time to build up strength and energy. Work with your medical team to find the right type of exercise for your child. Usually, **low-impact** exercises like **swimming, bicycling, walking, or yoga** are good ways to start gently increasing exercise. Even 5 minutes a day can be helpful!

Find the balance.

Your role may look different depending on your child's needs. For example, if your child is younger or has been struggling with symptoms for a long time, they may need a lot of support to stick to a plan. Over time, many parents and caregivers find that they can "step back" and let their child take the lead.

Keep a steady pace.

Your child will need to learn the art of taking a break, but balance it with the art of sticking to it! What doctors call "**pacing**" is finding the sweet spot of doing enough to make progress but not pushing too hard. Avoid an "**over-do**" cycle of doing too much too soon or an "**under-do**" cycle of too little activity because **both can make pain worse**. It's important to know that when you use this strategy their sweet spot will change - they will be able to do more and more over time.

Find the fun.

Doing something kids actually like to do makes it much easier to make progress with their goals. Encourage them to consider things like **going on a walk with a good friend or pet, playing a favorite game, or listening to music while being active**. As much as possible, help them find something **FUN** to focus on while doing all the things they need to (and hopefully want to) do!

Cut the pain talk.

To feel better and break the pain cycle, it is key to **NOT** focus on pain as much as possible. **Talking about pain increases that focus**, so please do not ask your child about their pain. It's not about ignoring your child's experience, but supporting their focus on other things and helping with their coping skills. Aim to validate their experience when they bring up pain, but also redirect them to a coping strategy or activity. Try something like: **"I know you are uncomfortable right now and it's really tough. What can you do to work towards feeling more comfortable?"**

Once the cycle of ongoing pain and resting too much is interrupted, mood and sleep often improve and that helps the recovery process!



A collaboration between Meg Foundation and the Society of Pediatric Psychology Pain SIG

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