



School Services

# School Guide for Student with Congenital Heart Defects

## What is a Congenital Heart Defects?

Congenital Heart Defects (CHO) are an abnormality in the heart's structure that develops early in pregnancy. CHO is the most common congenital defect affecting around 1 % of live newborn babies. Heart defects can range from mild to severe. Some congenital heart problems will require the child to undergo surgical intervention(s) during the first year of life. It is important to understand some congenital heart defects can be associated with developmental delays from birth to adulthood. Children with significant congenital heart disease are at risk for higher levels of behavior, social, emotional and academic difficulties.

## Treatment of Congenital Heart Defects:

While heart defects can't be prevented, treatments are available to manage them. Cardiologists (heart doctors) may repair CHO using a catheter (thin flexible tube); cardiac surgeons may repair the heart defect through surgical methods. There are also many medications that treat CHO which may be prescribed to your child by a cardiologist.

## How can Congenital Heart Defects affect School Performance?

Children with CHO are at risk for higher levels of academic and behavioral difficulties throughout their school years. Although the symptoms of CHO may vary with each child it is important for parents to discuss the following changes with the child's physician and school personnel. Children with CHO may struggle with:

- Attention/Concentration (distractible, impulsive)
- Processing Speed (takes longer to process information)
- Visual-Spatial Functions (copying from board; overwhelmed by crowded worksheets; having trouble finding his/her way around; handwriting difficulties)
- Cognitive impairment such as confusion, poor motor coordination, deficits in short-term or long-term memory, impaired judgment
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder - ADHD
- Oral-motor coordination - difficulty moving tongue, lips, and jaw for appropriate speech development
- Difficulties with expressive speech - difficulties putting thoughts into words and sentences
- Difficulties with visual-spatial skills - difficulties to visually adjust two and three dimensional figures
- Difficulties with visual motor skills - struggling to run, jump, write, feel, etc.
- Learning disabilities - difficulties with reading, writing and/or math
- Behavioral issues - anxiety, frustration, aggression, depression, avoidance
- Difficulties with social situations - isolation from peers and social settings such as not being able to participate in school sporting events/dances, etc.
- Low self esteeming (planning activities, abstract thinking, solving problems with two or more steps, organization)
- Reading and/or reading comprehension
- Understanding math facts or remembering math facts
- Emotional implications such as: low self-esteem; poor motivation; lower interest in school subjects; anxiety, depression or fear (before, during and after treatment)
- Physical complications such as: hair loss, mouth or throat sores, nausea and vomiting, diarrhea or constipation, anemia and fatigue, problems with eyesight or hearing, and the need for a wheelchair or prosthesis (artificial arm or leg)

## How can Schools Assist Students with Congenital Heart Defects?

### Academic

- Initiation of Section 504 or IDEA-Special Education testing for Other Health Impairments
- Allow extra time to complete class work or projects
- Assign a moderate work load that emphasizes quality vs. quantity
- Provide the student with an organizational checklist for routine activities, materials needed and steps to follow, this will assist with planning and structure of the school day to help with short term memory and organization
- Provide instruction targeting more than one learning style to assist with memory problems
- Use repetition and direct instruction to help with focus and attention
- Provide recorded information, highlighted textbooks and practice with recall skills
- Provide preferential seating to optimize concentration and lessen distractions
- Provide assistive technology such as an iPad or word processor for writing assignments
- Excuse tardiness and absence due to medical appointments

### Social/ Emotional

- Provide opportunities for success to elevate low self-esteem
- Reduce emphasis on competition; competitive activities may cause undue stress, leading to simple mistakes - repetitive failure could lead to avoidance of situations, assignments or responsibilities
- Provide counseling to address psychological or social effects of condition
- Behavior intervention plans can be helpful for students with behavioral concerns
- School nurse or hospital personnel can share age appropriate information regarding CHO with peers with parental consent

### Physical

- Provide PT/OT/ST evaluations and services if needed  
Inform teachers and staff of student's specific needs and condition
- Adjust activities to the child's tolerance, allow child to set own limits and closely monitor child for signs of fatigue and breathing difficulties

### Resources

[www.kidshealth.org](http://www.kidshealth.org)

*MCN/the American Journal of Maternal/Child Nursing*

*Cardiology in the Young (2013)*

[www.mydr.corn.au/heart](http://www.mydr.corn.au/heart)

### School Services Department

Children's Health

Children's Medical Center

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