

No where is the impact of TBI so greatly felt as within the family. While the student with brain injury is receiving many services and much attention, family members need to find ways to deal with their grief. The sudden onset of a disability and the many consequences can leave the family overwhelmed. Demands on time, financial resources, emotions and the demands on relationships can have significant impact on family members. Siblings can react with fear, frustration, anger and isolation. They may find it difficult to deal with the extra attention given to the child with the brain injury, particularly if special education and medical needs are new experiences for siblings.

Families now have to learn to handle a new world of hospitals, therapists, neurologists, social workers and education specialists. Families may need months or years to understand and accept the consequences of TBI. Many families are hopeful that the child will continue to make progress and can return to the performance they demonstrated before their injury. Sometimes school personnel may see this as denial. However, this can be a healthy response from parents provided it does not interfere with appropriate services for the child or deficits are not denied over a long period of time. It is beneficial for school personnel to understand what families are going through and to allow time for them to understand the extent and nature of the child's disability. (Savage, 1994)

The following are suggestions for families which need to be reviewed with the following parameters in mind:

- the child's *age and developmental level* at the time of injury
  - the *severity* of the injury
  - the *family's functioning* (coping, roles, flexibility) prior to the injury
  - the availability to *external support systems*
1. Learn how to care for yourselves, once again. It is difficult, under the best of circumstances, to be an effective advocate when you are mentally/physically exhausted. Give yourself permission to have a "day off" or a vacation. Allow others (family, friends, neighbors) to help.
  2. Become knowledgeable about your child's particular injury and, in general, about Traumatic Brain Injury.
  3. If you have not heard from the school department or special education office regarding transition back to school, find out the name of the Director of Special Education (via the rehabilitation facility, state Department of Education or your child's teacher or building principal) and call the office.

4. Familiarize yourself with your state's Department of Education regulations concerning special education services (RI Dept. of Ed., 401-222-4600 ext. 2301. Begin to familiarize yourself with some of the language and vocabulary (Individual Education Program (IEP), Procedural Safeguards, continuum of services, timelines, referral and evaluation process, etc.)
5. Keep in mind that you are a vital member of this process and try not to be overwhelmed by the "system"/bureaucracy. Bring a friend with you to meetings (to keep notes, refresh your memory, 'moral support'); come with a list of questions; have a folder to keep reports, IEPs and other pertinent information together in one place.
6. It is good to ask questions and to request that staff explain unfamiliar terminology, processes, programs or services. Don't be put off if there are not always immediate responses. Some questions require further inquiry, exploration, or collaborative problem solving.
7. Let the school staff know if the process is becoming overwhelming, or that a "break" of some duration would be helpful. Conversely, inform the staff if you would like greater participation (regular meetings, progress notes, phone contact, class visits.)
8. Recognize that a variety of developmental or situational events will trigger strong emotional reactions (loss, anger, denial, fear, anxiety, etc.):
  - your child's first day back to school after the injury
  - school functions (plays, chorus, sports, field trips, dances, prom, graduation)
  - changes in school sites (elementary-junior high, junior high-high school), teachers, therapists and building staff
  - anniversary dates
  - developmental stages (e.g. reaching school age, adolescence, young adulthood)
9. Seek out community based support systems:
  - local Brain Injury Association groups
  - Department of Health
  - Rehabilitation Facility

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Christine M. Cardosi, MSW, LICSW  
Special Education Office  
Pawtucket School Department  
Pawtucket, RI*