

Mobility Training for Power Wheelchairs

Training is usually most effective when done consistently – one trainer, consistent commands and instruction techniques and same location. Frequent, shorter sessions, such as 30 minutes five times a week, are more effective than longer, more infrequent sessions. Start in an area with few distractions, such as a school hallway during class. Then progress to driving with a few other people around and then, finally, to a number of other people.

These recommendations are for all levels of drivers. Some clients will move through these steps very quickly, particularly the first several steps. The amount of training will vary with the individual. If your driver is less advanced, they may require supervision while driving in certain situations.

The following guidelines are designed to develop and improve driving skills. Individual needs, deficits, motivations, and learning styles should be considered in training.

1. Positioning.

Make sure the driver is positioned as well as possible.

2. Access.

Make sure that the best access method is available (i.e. head switch) and properly positioned by the control site (i.e. the side of the head).

3. Stop and Go concepts.

In wide open spaces (if available), have the driver move the power wheelchair at your command and stop at your command. Direction is not important at this step. Try games such as Green Light, Red Light.

Encourage the driver to improve stopping response time. Explain to the driver why stopping quickly is important for safety. Instruct the driver to stop when instructed to by an adult, because the adult may see an obstacle the driver did not notice.

When driver understands stop and go concepts and is able to stop quickly on command (1-2 seconds), move to the next step.

4. Directional concepts.

Even if your driver does not understand “left” and “right”, they need to understand how to make the wheelchair move in a specific direction. Direct the driver by the directional word (i.e. “turn to your left”) or by indicating the direction (i.e. “turn this way” (pointing) or “follow me”). You can try games such as Follow the Leader. Do not worry about how accurately the driver moves the chair; this is to reinforce directional concepts only. As long as the driver moves in approximately the indicated direction, these concepts are being learned and demonstrated.

When the driver demonstrates directional concepts, move to the next step.

5. Accuracy.

This is where the driving skills are refined. The driver practices, and attempts to master, a series of courses. Progress to the next course after the previous course is mastered.

- Straight course

Mark out a straight course, approximately 6 feet in length and 4 feet wide. You can mark this with masking tape on the floor, chalk on the driveway, etc. Push the chair up to the start, so that the front castors are already turned back (this way the chair will move straight ahead). As your driver improves, narrow and lengthen the course.

- Corners course

Mark out a course that has a 90 degree turn. Start wide and begin to narrow. Have your driver negotiate this course from both directions to practice left and right turns.

- Curves course

Mark out a course with curves in either direction of various degrees. Narrow the width of the course as driver improves. Curves are more difficult than a corner.

6. Real life situations

- Inside

Have your driver attempt to get to a specific location. For example, at school, have the child drive from the classroom to the office. Help them problem solve how to get around obstacles, but do not give specific commands, such as “go forward, stop, turn left, stop, go forward again”. Rather allow the driver to figure it out. We want driving to be second nature, not following a series of commands.

Next, practice getting through doorways. Finally, practice getting in and out of tight spaces (i.e. the bathroom).

- Outside

Practice driving on sidewalks safely. Practice going up and down ramps and curb cuts. Practice going in and out of buildings. Problem solve difficult situations such as getting in a building without a door opener (i.e. “ask someone open the door for you”) or crossing the street when there are no curb cuts (i.e. “go to the next corner, if there is a curb cut there”). Stress safety, safety, safety!