

Recognizing a Child's Early TBI Later in the Classroom

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Dr. Ann Glang: The biggest challenge with children, as they age, is that often they grow into their injury, so we might have a child who's injured at 18 months in a car crash, and they come back. They are treated medically. They go back home, and they seem to be developing fine. And everyone thinks nothing of the injury, and in fact, oftentimes don't even remember the injury and don't communicate the information about the injury to professionals who are then in the position to serve the child.

So the child gets to first grade -- kindergarten, first grade, second grade, they do fine because in those situations, we talk about the teacher serving as the frontal lobe. So the teacher's saying, "Johnny, pick up your pencil. Johnny, write the letter one. Johnny, put your pencil down now. Johnny, take your pencil and put it in your desk." So one step commands, very simple to follow, but when you start getting into third grade, fourth grade, fifth grade, and you're asked, "Okay, Johnny, I want you to write a book report about one of the books on the board here. Pick a story, and then write a summary of that, and tell us what you think about that story." Well, that's a very complex set of tasks and involves sequencing, involves lots of abstract thinking and planning and organizing, and that's just where a lot of kids with a brain injury will fall apart.

So maybe Johnny starts having trouble. Nobody remembers at 18 months, he had an injury. Nobody connects those dots, and that happens an awful lot. We see it, also, in moving from the child who's had an injury as an elementary school age child, and then as they get into adolescence, we attribute a lot of the problems they're having socially, cognitively, behaviorally, to adolescence. They're lazy. They're not motivated. They come from a bad family. No one remembers the injury. And that's really kind of the story in childhood brain injury. We don't remember the injuries, and it's not on the radar screen of a lot of schools, so that some of those behaviors that might alert you or I don't alert the teacher who's got 35 kids in her class and is trying to figure out why Johnny's misbehaving.