Speedway Sam
Speedway Sam
A Book About Spinal Cord Injury For Children

Developed by:
University of Alabama at Birmingham
Medical Rehabilitation Research and
Training Center in Prevention and
Treatment of Secondary Complications
of Spinal Cord Injury
Department of Rehabilitation Medicine
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A Note to Parents and Teachers

Speedway Sam was written to help children become aware of spinal cord injuries (SCI) and to learn some SCI prevention measures. A spinal cord awareness vocabulary has been included in the glossary. It will be helpful to review the vocabulary before the book is read. This will help the child understand the story better when he/she encounters the new vocabulary in the text. The pictures in this booklet are designed so that your child can color it if desired.

This book should also be helpful to a child who has a spinal cord injury as he/she attempts to explain his/her disability to others. Hopefully, it will help all children develop a sensitivity to a person with SCI as well as develop behaviors that will prevent SCI.

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My name is Sam. I’m 8 1/2 years old. I haven’t always been in a wheelchair. I used to be able to walk and run just like you do. One day my mom picked me up after school. She asked me if I wanted to go to the store to buy some new shoes. Of course I did, especially if we could grab a bite to eat at a restaurant. We did our shopping and ate a big hamburger. It had been raining while we were in the store. It was still sprinkling a little, so we ran to our car. I forgot to buckle my safety belt because we were in a hurry. Mom said the road was very slippery so she was driving much slower than usual. The problem is, not everyone is as careful as my mom when they drive.
A man who must have been in a big hurry came speeding past our car and pulled in front of us. Mom had to slam on her brakes real hard. When she did, our car hit a slippery spot on the road and mom lost control of the car. It began spinning and ran off the road and hit a tree. I don’t remember much after that. The next thing I remember was the ambulance crew trying to get me out of the car. They put me on a big flat board and strapped me down so I wouldn’t move and hurt myself even more. They put me in an ambulance with my mom and took us to the hospital.
My mom had bruises all over and a broken arm. She was smart. She remembered to buckle her safety belt. She could have been hurt worse. I had what they called a spinal cord injury. I couldn’t move my feet or legs. I couldn’t feel my legs at all. The doctor explained to me later what he meant by a spinal cord injury. He said that the spinal cord is like a long rope that goes from my brain down to the lower part of my back. It is protected by bones in the back. These backbones look like 29 empty spools of thread stacked on top of each other. These bones are called vertebrae. They form a hard, boney tunnel that the spinal cord passes through.
The spinal cord is very delicate. When it is hurt in any way, it can affect the way you move or feel. Your spinal cord is made up of nerves and it’s connected to your brain. Nerves tell you to feel things like heat and cold and they let you move parts of your body. The nerves send messages through your spinal cord and tell your brain what’s going on. When your spinal cord is hurt, it’s like cutting a phone cord. Now your nerves can’t send messages to your brain anymore and let it know what’s happening. You can’t feel or move anything on your body below the place where your spinal cord was hurt.

After I left the hospital, they took me to a rehabilitation center. At a rehabilitation center, they help you become stronger and learn to use parts of your body again. Dr. Jones, my doctor at the rehabilitation center, said that when we hit the tree my back was broken and my spinal cord was damaged.
He said that my legs were paralyzed and that I was a paraplegic. This means I can’t use the bottom part of my body anymore. I can’t move my legs, or feel them, or ever walk again.

I got really upset when I thought about never being able to walk again. At first, I wouldn’t help the doctors, nurses and other people at the rehabilitation center when they came to do my therapy. Therapy is what they did to help me get stronger and learn how to use other parts of my body in ways I’d never had to use them before. One example of therapy is when they put me in leg braces. They had me hold on to two bars and stand up so I could exercise my leg muscles. They also taught me how to get in and out of bed by myself, how to dress myself, how to get in and out of the bathtub, how to go to the bathroom and other day-to-day activities.
Since I was hurt and couldn’t use parts of my body like I used to, I had to learn to do things differently. Dr. Jones said if I cooperated with everybody I would get stronger sooner. He said when I proved to them I could help take care of myself I could go home! And I really wanted to go home. I finally decided to make the best of it.

I started doing the exercises with a little more energy. They finally taught me how to get in and out of my wheelchair by myself. Pretty soon, I was speeding up and down the long rehabilitation center hallways visiting other patients. I really liked going to the game room. It was around the corner from my room. I would wheel my chair down the hall and turn the corner into the game room. The nurses said they were going to give me a speeding ticket for going too fast in the halls! They began calling me Speedway Sam because of my speedy wheels.
When I first realized that I was paralyzed, all I could think of was what I couldn’t do. I couldn’t ride my bike, play baseball or football. I was feeling pretty sorry for myself when Kathy, one of my therapists, came into my room. She’s real smart and knew right off I was feeling bad about things. She told me to stop thinking about all the things I couldn’t do and think about what I could do. She said I could still swim, play pitch and catch, basketball and even ride a horse with help.

Kathy also told me I was very lucky. I didn’t know how until she explained it. Some people with spinal cord injuries are like me and can’t use their legs. But other people can’t even use their arms very much and sometimes they can’t use them at all. These people are called tetraplegics. These people may not have use of their arms or legs, but they can still learn to do many things for themselves.
Finally, the day came when Dr. Jones said I could go home and back to school.

I was a little afraid about going back to school. I didn’t know what the other kids would think about me now. After all, I looked different from the last time they saw me. Mrs. Green, my teacher, met me early at the front door on my first day back. Getting into the school was easy because we have a ramp at the front door. The doorways to the classrooms and bathrooms are also wide enough for my wheelchair to get through. Mrs. Green fixed a nice little work table for me in the classroom that was high enough for my wheelchair to fit under.

When lunchtime came, the other children ran out, leaving me alone. They did not talk to me at recess either. My feelings were hurt because my friends were not playing with me like they did before my accident.
Mrs. Green could tell that Sam was feeling left out. She talked to the other children to find out why they were avoiding Sam. Sally said she was afraid of the wheelchair. Joe said he was afraid of Sam because he looked different since he had his accident.

When we came back from lunch, Mrs. Green thought it would help all of us if we talked about my injury. She asked if I would explain my injury to the class. She said I could tell them what I could or couldn’t do. I told her I’d tell them what I could do. I felt a little shy talking about it to the other kids but pretty soon, we were talking and laughing just like we used to do.

I began by telling them about the wreck. I told them that if I had buckled my safety belt, maybe I would not have been hurt so badly. Then I talked about my hospital and rehabilitation center stay. I told them how I did my exercises and how I learned to use my wheelchair to help me get around.
Even though it isn’t easy to do all the things I used to, I can still do many things using my wheelchair. I told them all about playing basketball in my wheelchair! I even got to go swimming when I had someone to help me. I was excited to tell them about the wheelchair races I would soon enter. I told them how the nurses at the rehabilitation center cheered me on to enter the races. The kids laughed when I told them my nickname, Speedway Sam. I showed them a picture of my sports wheelchair which looks different from my regular one.

After I finished, I asked if they had any questions. Jimmy asked, “Can I catch SCI?” I laughed and said “no,” but I told him it could happen to him if he didn’t wear his safety belt and follow rules of safety.
Safety Rules

1. Always wear a safety belt when riding in a car. Most spinal cord injuries happen because of car accidents.
2. Keep toys and games off the floor to prevent falls.
3. Don’t climb on high walls or trees.
4. Never play with or near guns. A bullet can also damage the spinal cord.
5. Never dive in shallow water. Every summer, kids forget to check the place where they’re swimming to see if there are any hidden tree stumps or rocks. Always jump in water feet first, the first time.
6. Wear protective equipment when playing sports.
7. Never use drugs or alcohol.
8. Be careful on playground equipment.
9. Obey all traffic rules and wear protective clothing when riding a bicycle. Never run out into traffic.
10. Learn and follow all safety rules before using four-wheeler ATVs, go-carts and other motorized sports vehicles.

Nancy asked, “What can I do to prevent SCI?” I told her what I had learned at the rehabilitation center. The kids in my class asked Mrs. Green if they could make posters to put up around the school to remind the kids in other classes about preventing spinal cord injuries. She thought it was a great idea, so we spent the rest of the morning making posters.
Billy (I call him Billy the Bully) asked, “Does it bother you to be handicapped?” I thought about it. Then I told him how I really felt. “I don’t consider myself handicapped. Sure Billy, there are lots of things I can’t do the same way anymore. But there are lots of things I can do if I try. I just do things in different ways,” I said.
I told Billy I only had a technical difficulty, just like the TV has sometimes. My spinal cord was damaged just like the cord to the TV can be damaged. I may have to do things differently, but I still enjoy life. I’m still the same Sam I always was. I just get around in different ways now. The other kids even began to tell people I only had a technical difficulty, not a handicap!
Anyway, here I am, a year and a half later, wheeling through each day doing the best I can. I race in my wheelchair, swim, go horseback riding and play basketball. Sure, it’s different. Sometimes it’s much harder than it used to be, but I know I’m real lucky. I can do many more things than some other kids with spinal cord injuries. So when you see me, or a person like me, don’t feel sorry for us. Instead, help us find new ways to handle our technical difficulties.

Well, I have to go practice now. The wheelchair races begin next week. I hope I win, but even if I don’t, I’ll still have fun trying. Look out kids, here comes Speedway Sam!
Speedway Sam

Glossary

*Paraplegic* - A person whose spinal cord is damaged so that they can’t use their lower body or legs.

*Paralyzed* - When you can’t move or do not have feeling in a part of your body anymore.

*Therapist* - A healthcare professional who works with your legs and large muscles and joints to help them become stronger.

*Tetraplegic* - A person whose spinal cord is damaged so that they can’t use their lower body, legs and all or part of their arms or upper body.

*Rehabilitation* - Learning how to live your life with your disability.

*Rehabilitation Center* - A place where people teach you how to live your life with your disability.

*Spinal Cord* - A rope-like bundle of nerves that runs from the base of your brain through the vertebrae to the lower part of your back.

*Spinal Cord Injury (SCI)* - An injury to your back or neck that also causes the spinal cord to be damaged.

*Vertebrae* - The 29 bones in your spinal column that protect your spinal cord.