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## Fit for life

*Mikaela exercises her  
right to independence*

# Mikaela exercises her right to independence



Like most five-year-old girls, Mikaela Williams loves pink, butterflies and sparkles. But unlike many of her peers in her prep class at school, she also has a fierce determination to learn how to walk.

Mikaela is the youngest member of the Walk On exercise-based rehabilitation program at the Association's Brisbane fitness and rehabilitation centre. The program aims to improve her independence and mitigate the effects of a rare congenital condition that has caused incomplete cervical spinal damage.

Initially diagnosed as cerebral palsy, an MRI scan identified Mikaela's condition was spinal damage caused by incomplete C1 and C2 vertebrae development. She uses a wheelchair for mobility and has impaired function in her arms, legs and hips.

For Mikaela's parents Peter and Louise, it has been a long and frustrating search to find the right therapy and equipment to enable their daughter to catch up on critical early development milestones in crawling and walking.



(Photography by Tim Size)

"No-one prepares you for the fact that when your child is operated on at 10 months and has to wear a halo to restrict her upper body, that's where the development stops," says Mikaela's father, Peter.

"Three years later when the halo came off, she was still at that 10-month stage, with over-active primitive reflexes that would literally throw her out of her chair.

"So many people told us that we should just accept her being the way she was, but we believed there had to be a way to reduce the deficit in her development."

An exercise physiologist told Peter and Louise about Walk On, which includes gait training, balance and stability exercises for people with neurological/musculoskeletal conditions. Mikaela uses a special paediatric harness suspended from an overhead frame to hold her upright while she uses equipment such as a cross trainer and treadmill to activate her muscles and learn 'good' walking patterns, with support and encouragement from the Walk On therapists and Peter.

"We're doing two 2-hour sessions each week, building up her fitness and getting her in the right condition and physically capable of getting maximum benefit from the gait training sessions," says Peter.

"It's a slow process, but we're noticing the differences in terms of her strength, her balance and her independence.

"Kids like Mikaela need places like this. When you combine an intensive, consistent and disciplined program with committed therapists and parents working together, that is a potent mix that launches their development into overdrive.

"There's no manual for kids like Mikaela, but that doesn't mean you are stuck with having to do nothing."

Walk On is a Spinal Cord Injuries Australia (SCIA) program. To find out more, visit [www.sportingwheelies.org.au](http://www.sportingwheelies.org.au) or contact SCIA on 1800 819 775.