Understanding Muscle Tone

Muscle tone is the continuous partial contraction in a muscle. Muscle tone determines how well the muscle works when the brain signals the body to hold a position or perform a movement. For example, it affects sitting, standing, reaching and walking.

Strength and muscle tone are not the same thing, but they are related. Normal muscle tone makes it easier to strengthen muscles.

The type of muscle tone a person has is present at birth.

- Good (average) muscle tone allows muscles and joints to move easily.
- “Low” muscle tone, or hypotonia, means that the muscle is soft and flabby. It makes movement difficult because the muscle is not held together well.
- “High” muscle tone, or hypertonia, means that the muscle is stiff, so it is difficult to relax the muscle and move the joint freely.

If your child has low or high muscle tone, you can modify the ways you hold or position your child. You can make your child’s movements easier by the way you change, bathe or position your child in a highchair or crib. A physical or occupational therapist can help you with these techniques.

When a child has high or low muscle tone, it may affect motor skills. It may also cause problems with speaking and thinking skills. Muscle tone that is either very high or very low sometimes indicates a neurological disorder. Therefore, early intervention to help develop motor skills is highly important.

We recommend follow-up visits to the Adoption Medicine Clinic to detect any problems. We may refer your child for services at your local school system or to a rehab clinic. At the clinic your child may have physical, speech or occupational therapies.