

# The Effect of Seat Surface Inclination on Postural Control and Upper Extremity Function in Children with Cerebral Palsy- A Crossover Study

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## Abstract

**Background:** Children with cerebral palsy spend prolonged periods in sitting, particularly in school settings. Adaptive seating, including seat surface inclination, may influence postural control and upper extremity function.

**Methods:** A cross-over study was conducted on 25 children with spastic cerebral palsy (8-13 years). Postural control and upper extremity function were assessed using the Sitting Assessment Scale, Seated Postural Control Measure, Functional Assessment Battery Tool, and ABILHAND-Kids Questionnaire under neutral, anterior, and posterior seat inclination conditions.

**Results:** Significant differences were observed across seating conditions in postural control, alignment, and selected upper extremity functional outcomes ( $p < 0.05$ ).

**Conclusion:** A 10° seat inclination significantly influenced seated postural control and upper extremity function in children with spastic cerebral palsy.

**Keywords:** Cerebral palsy; postural control; upper extremity function; adaptive seating; seat inclination

## Introduction

Cerebral palsy is a group of permanent disorders affecting the development of movement and posture, resulting in activity limitations and attributed to non-progressive disturbances in the developing fetal or infant brain.<sup>1</sup> In India, the pooled prevalence of cerebral palsy is reported as 2.95 per 1,000 children, while the global prevalence is approximately 2.11 per 1,000 live births.<sup>2, 3</sup> Cerebral palsy represents a heterogeneous group of motor disorders, most

commonly classified by motor type and topographical distribution, with spastic cerebral palsy being the predominant form.<sup>4-7</sup>

Children with cerebral palsy frequently exhibit impairments in postural control due to muscle tightness, weakness, impaired selective motor control, and excessive co-contraction of antagonist muscles.<sup>8-14</sup> These impairments affect the ability to maintain and modify sitting posture and subsequently influence upper extremity function and participation in daily and school-related activities.<sup>15,16</sup>

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Upper extremity dysfunction in cerebral palsy arises from both motor and sensory impairments, including reduced strength, limited range of motion, spasticity, poor coordination, and deficits in proprioception and tactile perception.<sup>17-21</sup> These deficits contribute to limitations in reaching, grasping, manipulation, and functional task performance, leading to restricted participation across home, school, and community environments.<sup>22-24</sup>

Pelvic positioning and trunk alignment are critical for achieving a functional sitting posture necessary for optimal upper extremity performance. Adequate postural control provides proximal stability, enabling improved distal upper limb mobility. Modifications in seating systems can alter pelvic and trunk orientation relative to gravity, thereby enhancing postural stability and functional arm use.<sup>25-32</sup>

Children with cerebral palsy spend a substantial amount of time in sitting, particularly in school settings, making adaptive seating strategies an important component of intervention. Anterior and posterior seat inclinations are commonly used to promote postural stability and functional performance.<sup>33-34</sup> Anterior seat inclination encourages anterior pelvic tilt and upright sitting posture, potentially enhancing upper limb function, whereas posterior seat inclination may increase stability by preventing forward sliding but can also increase postural effort.<sup>35-38</sup>

Previous studies have reported variable effects of seat inclination based on cerebral palsy subtype and angle of inclination. Seat inclinations around 10° have been associated with improved postural stability and reaching performance, while steeper inclinations appear to offer limited additional benefit.<sup>39, 40</sup> However, comparative evidence examining the effects of both anterior and posterior seat inclination on postural control and upper extremity function remains limited.

Therefore, the present study aimed to evaluate the effect of **anterior and posterior seat surface inclination** on seated postural control and upper extremity functional performance in children with spastic cerebral palsy.

## Objective of the Study

To evaluate the effect of seat surface inclination on postural control and upper extremity function in children with cerebral palsy.

## Materials and Methods

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Institutional Ethics Committee prior to the commencement of the study.

A total of 39 children with spastic cerebral palsy were screened for eligibility. Of these, 28 participants who met the selection criteria were recruited using a convenience sampling method from special schools and rehabilitation centers. Children aged 8–13 years diagnosed with spastic cerebral palsy (unilateral or bilateral), classified under the Manual Ability Classification System (MACS) levels I-III, able to understand and follow verbal commands, and having a passive hip flexion range of motion of 90° ± 10° (measured using a goniometer) were included.

Participants were excluded if they had severe visual impairment; upper extremity deformities involving the shoulder, elbow, or wrist; restricted shoulder range of motion (shoulder flexion or abduction <120°); fixed trunk deformities such as kyphosis or scoliosis or a positive Adam's forward bend test; or hip pain ≥5 on the Numerical Rating Scale (NRS-11).

A patient information sheet, informed consent form, informed assent form, and videography consent form were provided to the parent or class teacher of each participant, and written informed consent was obtained prior to participation.

This study employed a cross-over design, wherein each participant was exposed to both anterior and posterior seat inclinations using a custom-built foam wedge of 10°. A 15-minute familiarization period was provided for each seating condition, and outcome measures were recorded during each condition. A washout period of 30 minutes was allowed between seating conditions to minimize potential carry-over effects.

Assessments were conducted with participants seated on a standard chair with armrests, backrest, and footrest using the Sitting Assessment Scale, Seated Postural Control Measure, Functional Assessment Battery Tool, and ABILHAND-Kids Questionnaire.

Although 28 participants were initially recruited, complete data across all seating conditions were available for 25 participants only. Participants with incomplete assessment data or inability to complete both seating conditions as per the crossover protocol were excluded from the final analysis to ensure the integrity of within-subject comparisons.

### Statistical Analysis

Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS version 28.0, with data from 25 participants analyzed according to the within-subject comparisons planned for the cross-over design. Sitting Assessment Scale scores were analyzed using Fisher's Exact Test; Seated Postural Control Measure, ABILHAND-Kids Questionnaire, and Functional Assessment Battery

activities 1 and 7 were analyzed using repeated measures ANOVA; and Functional Assessment Battery activities 2-6 were analyzed using the Friedman test, with Bonferroni and Wilcoxon signed-rank tests applied for post-hoc analysis as appropriate. A p-value < 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

### Results

**Table 1: Demographic characteristics of subjects (n=25)**

| Characteristics    | Frequency        | %  |
|--------------------|------------------|----|
| Age- mean $\pm$ SD | 11.72 $\pm$ 1.77 |    |
| Gender- Male       | 16               | 64 |
| Gender- Female     | 9                | 36 |

All participants demonstrated good head control across seating conditions. Trunk control was predominantly good across positions, while foot, arm, and hand functions showed variation across normal, anterior, and posterior seating conditions (Table 2).

**Table 2. Sitting Assessment Scale- Frequency and percentage of normal, anterior and posterior seat inclinations**

|                      |      | Normal    |      | Anterior  |      | Posterior |      |
|----------------------|------|-----------|------|-----------|------|-----------|------|
|                      |      | Frequency | %    | Frequency | %    | Frequency | %    |
| <b>Head control</b>  | Good | 25        | 100  | 25        | 100  | 25        | 100  |
|                      | Fair | 2         | 9.5  | 2         | 9.5  | 2         | 9.5  |
| <b>Trunk control</b> | Good | 19        | 90.5 | 19        | 90.5 | 19        | 90.5 |
|                      | Poor | 0         | 0    | 0         | 0    | 1         | 4.8  |
| <b>Foot control</b>  | Fair | 3         | 14.3 | 1         | 4.8  | 8         | 38.1 |
|                      | Good | 18        | 85.7 | 20        | 95.2 | 12        | 57.1 |
|                      | Fair | 12        | 57.1 | 9         | 42.9 | 11        | 52.4 |
| <b>Arm function</b>  | Good | 9         | 42.9 | 12        | 57.1 | 10        | 47.6 |
|                      | Fair | 21        | 100  | 3         | 14.3 | 10        | 47.6 |
| <b>Hand function</b> | Good | 0         | 0    | 18        | 85.7 | 11        | 52.4 |

Significant associations between seating condition and trunk control and arm function were identified (Table 3)

**Table 3. Comparison of trunk control, arm function, hand function, foot control between normal and anterior seats**

|                        |      | Anterior |     |      |     | Fisher's Exact Test | p value |
|------------------------|------|----------|-----|------|-----|---------------------|---------|
|                        |      | Fair     |     | Good |     |                     |         |
|                        |      | N        | %   | N    | %   |                     |         |
| Trunk control (Normal) | Fair | 2        | 100 | 0    | 0   | 0.003               | 0.005*  |
|                        | Good | 0        | 0   | 19   | 100 |                     |         |
| Arm function (Normal)  | Fair | 9        | 100 | 3    | 25  | 0.001               | 0.001*  |
|                        | Good | 0        | 0   | 9    | 75  |                     |         |
| Hand function (Normal) | Fair | 3        | 100 | 18   | 100 | --                  | --      |
| Foot control (Normal)  | Fair | 1        | 100 | 2    | 10  | 0.143               | 0.143   |
|                        | Good | 0        | 0   | 18   | 90  |                     |         |

(\* Significant)

Significant associations between seating condition and trunk control and arm function were identified (Table 4).

**Table 4. Comparison of trunk control, arm function, hand function between normal and posterior seats**

|                        |      | Posterior |      |      |     | Fisher's Exact Test | p value |
|------------------------|------|-----------|------|------|-----|---------------------|---------|
|                        |      | Fair      |      | Good |     |                     |         |
|                        |      | N         | %    | n    | %   |                     |         |
| Trunk control (Normal) | Fair | 2         | 100  | 0    | 0   | 0.003               | 0.005*  |
|                        | Good | 0         | 0    | 19   | 100 |                     |         |
| Arm function (Normal)  | Fair | 10        | 90.9 | 2    | 20  | 0.002               | 0.002*  |
|                        | Good | 1         | 9.1  | 8    | 80  |                     |         |
| Hand function (Normal) | Fair | 10        | 100  | 11   | 100 | --                  | --      |

(\* Significant)

A significant association between seating condition and foot control was identified (Table 5).

**Table 5. Comparison of foot control between the seats**

|                         |      | Posterior |     |      |      |      |      | Likelihood ratio | p value |
|-------------------------|------|-----------|-----|------|------|------|------|------------------|---------|
|                         |      | Poor      |     | Fair |      | Good |      |                  |         |
|                         |      | N         | %   | n    | %    | N    | %    |                  |         |
| Foot control (Normal)   | Fair | 1         | 100 | 1    | 12.5 | 1    | 8.3  | 4.312            | 0.116   |
|                         | Good | 0         | 0   | 7    | 87.5 | 11   | 91.7 |                  |         |
| Foot control (Anterior) | Fair | 1         | 100 | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 8.041            | 0.018*  |
|                         | Good | 0         | 0   | 8    | 100  | 12   | 100  |                  |         |

(\* Significant)

Significant associations between seating condition and trunk control and arm function were identified (Table 6).

**Table 6. Comparison of trunk control, arm function, hand function between anterior and posterior seats**

|                          |      | Posterior |      |      |     | Fisher's Exact Test | p value  |
|--------------------------|------|-----------|------|------|-----|---------------------|----------|
|                          |      | Fair      |      | Good |     |                     |          |
|                          |      | N         | %    | n    | %   |                     |          |
| Trunk control (Anterior) | Fair | 2         | 100  | 0    | 0   | 0.003               | 0.005*   |
|                          | Good | 0         | 0    | 19   | 100 |                     |          |
| Arm function (Anterior)  | Fair | 9         | 81.8 | 0    | 0   | 0.0002              | < 0.001* |
|                          | Good | 2         | 18.2 | 10   | 100 |                     |          |
| Hand function (Anterior) | Fair | 3         | 30   | 0    | 0   | 0.090               | 0.090    |
|                          | Good | 7         | 70   | 11   | 100 |                     |          |

(\* Significant)

Significant differences in the alignment and functional sections were identified across seating conditions (Table 7).

**Table 7. SPCM scale- Comparison of Level of Sitting Scale (LSS), alignment section, functional section according to the seats**

|                    |           | Mean  | S.D. | "F"    | p value  |
|--------------------|-----------|-------|------|--------|----------|
| LSS                | Normal    | 7.38  | 0.67 | 3.1    | 0.056    |
|                    | Anterior  | 7.33  | 0.66 |        |          |
|                    | Posterior | 7.10  | 0.62 |        |          |
| Alignment section  | Normal    | 64.14 | 2.35 | 38.057 | < 0.001* |
|                    | Anterior  | 61.71 | 3.00 |        |          |
|                    | Posterior | 57.95 | 3.63 |        |          |
| Functional section | Normal    | 42.29 | 1.15 | 18.135 | < 0.001* |
|                    | Anterior  | 43.38 | 1.60 |        |          |
|                    | Posterior | 41.95 | 1.16 |        |          |

(\* Significant)

Significant differences in the alignment and functional sections were identified across seating conditions (Table 8).

**Table 8. Pairwise comparison of alignment section and functional section**

| Domain     | Seat Comparison       | Mean Difference | p value  |
|------------|-----------------------|-----------------|----------|
| Alignment  | Normal vs Anterior    | 2.43            | 0.014*   |
|            | Normal vs Posterior   | 6.19            | < 0.001* |
|            | Anterior vs Posterior | 3.76            | < 0.001* |
| Functional | Normal vs Anterior    | -1.10           | 0.003*   |
|            | Normal vs Posterior   | 0.33            | 0.389    |
|            | Anterior vs Posterior | 1.43            | < 0.001* |

(\* Significant)

No significant differences were identified in overhead, forward, or sideways reaching across seating conditions (Table 9).

**Table 9. Functional assessment battery- Comparison of overhead, forward, sideway according to the seats**

|                 |           | Mean  | S.D. | "F"   | p value |
|-----------------|-----------|-------|------|-------|---------|
| <b>Overhead</b> | Normal    | 55.33 | 6.78 | 0.235 | 0.792   |
|                 | Anterior  | 56.07 | 7.33 |       |         |
|                 | Posterior | 55.48 | 6.56 |       |         |
| <b>Forward</b>  | Normal    | 53.14 | 6.58 | 2.536 | 0.107   |
|                 | Anterior  | 56.00 | 7.24 |       |         |
|                 | Posterior | 53.38 | 7.17 |       |         |
| <b>Sideway</b>  | Normal    | 52.81 | 6.45 | 3.575 | 0.056   |
|                 | Anterior  | 54.90 | 6.20 |       |         |
|                 | Posterior | 53.24 | 6.14 |       |         |

Significant differences were identified in Activities 4–6 across seating conditions (Table 10).

**Table 10. Comparison of activity 2, 3, 4, 5 & 6 according to the seats**

| Activity (sec)    | Seat Comparison | Median | IQR            | Friedman's ANOVA | p value       |
|-------------------|-----------------|--------|----------------|------------------|---------------|
| <b>Activity 2</b> | Normal          | 25     | 15.5 to 30     | 2.620            | 0.270         |
|                   | Anterior        | 24     | 13.5 to 29     |                  |               |
|                   | Posterior       | 22     | 13 to 29.5     |                  |               |
| <b>Activity 3</b> | Normal          | 47     | 32.5 to 58     | 6.317            | 0.051         |
|                   | Anterior        | 37     | 24 to 56       |                  |               |
|                   | Posterior       | 45     | 28.5 to 55.5   |                  |               |
| <b>Activity 4</b> | Normal          | 31     | 22.5 to 48.5   | 6.872            | <b>0.032*</b> |
|                   | Anterior        | 25     | 21 to 40       |                  |               |
|                   | Posterior       | 32     | 19.5 to 37.5   |                  |               |
| <b>Activity 5</b> | Normal          | 191.4  | 128.7 to 246   | 13.238           | <b>0.001*</b> |
|                   | Anterior        | 146.4  | 105 to 229.2   |                  |               |
|                   | Posterior       | 180.6  | 93.6 to 231.6  |                  |               |
| <b>Activity 6</b> | Normal          | 369    | 226.2 to 690   | 10.289           | <b>0.006*</b> |
|                   | Anterior        | 321    | 143.1 to 593.4 |                  |               |
|                   | Posterior       | 327.6  | 137.4 to 627.6 |                  |               |

(\* Significant)

Significant differences were identified in Activities 4–6 across seating conditions (Table 11).

**Table 11. Pairwise comparison of activity 4, 5 and 6**

| Activity (sec) | Seat Comparison       | Z value | p value       |
|----------------|-----------------------|---------|---------------|
| Activity 4     | Normal vs Anterior    | -2.529  | <b>0.011*</b> |
|                | Normal vs Posterior   | -2.265  | <b>0.024*</b> |
|                | Anterior vs Posterior | -1.157  | 0.247         |
| Activity 5     | Normal vs Anterior    | -3.181  | <b>0.001*</b> |
|                | Normal vs Posterior   | -1.930  | 0.054         |
|                | Anterior vs Posterior | -2.068  | <b>0.039*</b> |
| Activity 6     | Normal vs Anterior    | -3.319  | <b>0.001*</b> |
|                | Normal vs Posterior   | -2.798  | <b>0.005*</b> |
|                | Anterior vs Posterior | -0.952  | 0.341         |

(\* Significant)

Activity 7 differed significantly across seating conditions (Table 12).

**Table 12. Comparison of activity 7 according to the seats**

|                                |           | Mean   | S.D.  | "F"   | p value       |
|--------------------------------|-----------|--------|-------|-------|---------------|
| Activity 7<br>(Distance in Cm) | Normal    | 217.29 | 88.74 | 5.437 | <b>0.019*</b> |
|                                | Anterior  | 245.38 | 90.10 |       |               |
|                                | Posterior | 235.62 | 93.44 |       |               |

(\* Significant)

Activity 7 differed significantly between neutral and anterior seating (Table 13).

**Table 13. Pairwise comparison of activity 7**

| Activity 7 (Distance in Cm) |           | Mean Difference | p value       |
|-----------------------------|-----------|-----------------|---------------|
| Normal                      | Anterior  | -28.10          | <b>0.031*</b> |
|                             | Posterior | -18.33          | 0.255         |
| Anterior                    | Posterior | 9.76            | 0.169         |

(\* Significant)

ABILHAND-Kids scores differed significantly across seating conditions (Table 14).

**Table 14. Comparison of ABILHAND kids questionnaire according to the seats**

|                                |           | Mean  | S.D. | "F"    | p value            |
|--------------------------------|-----------|-------|------|--------|--------------------|
| ABILHAND kids<br>questionnaire | Normal    | 34.52 | 5.83 | 27.386 | <b>&lt; 0.001*</b> |
|                                | Anterior  | 35.90 | 5.66 |        |                    |
|                                | Posterior | 33.67 | 6.19 |        |                    |

(\* Significant)

Significant post-hoc differences were observed in ABILHAND-Kids scores (Table 15).

**Table 15. Pairwise comparison of ABILHAND kid's questionnaire**

| ABILHAND kids questionnaire |           | Mean Difference | p value  |
|-----------------------------|-----------|-----------------|----------|
| Normal                      | Anterior  | -1.38           | < 0.001* |
|                             | Posterior | 0.86            | 0.036*   |
| Anterior                    | Posterior | 2.24            | < 0.001* |

(\* Significant)

## Results

Twenty-five children with spastic cerebral palsy participated in the study (mean age  $11.72 \pm 1.77$  years; 64% male); baseline characteristics are presented in Table 1. Significant differences were observed in trunk, arm, hand, and foot control on the Sitting Assessment Scale and in the alignment and functional sections of the Seated Postural Control Measure across seating conditions (Tables 2-8). No significant differences were found in overhead, forward, or sideways reaching (Table 9); however, Functional Assessment Battery activities 4-7 and ABILHAND-Kids Questionnaire scores differed significantly across seating conditions (Tables 10-15).

## Discussion

The present study examined the effect of anterior and posterior seat inclination on postural control and upper extremity function in children with spastic cerebral palsy. The findings demonstrated that seat inclination was associated with significant differences in seated postural control and selected upper extremity functional tasks.

### Postural Control and Seat Inclination

The results indicated significant differences in postural control across seating conditions, as reflected by the Sitting Assessment Scale and Seated Postural Control Measure. Improvements in trunk control and arm function were observed with seat inclination, particularly with anterior seating. Anterior seat inclination promotes an upright sitting posture by facilitating anterior pelvic tilt and reducing slouched sitting, which may enhance proximal

stability. In contrast, foot control was reduced in posterior seat inclination, possibly due to decreased weight-bearing through the feet.

The Seated Postural Control Measure demonstrated significant differences in both alignment and functional sections across seating conditions. Functional performance appeared more favourable in anterior and neutral seating, while alignment scores were relatively better in neutral seating. These findings suggest that seat inclination influences pelvic and trunk alignment, which in turn affects postural stability during sitting.

Previous studies have reported similar findings. Cherg et al. reported improved postural stability with anterior seat inclination, attributed to increased weight-bearing through the feet. Hadders-Algra et al. observed improved postural control and reaching performance with forward seat inclination in children with unilateral spastic cerebral palsy, while horizontal seating was more beneficial for children with bilateral involvement. The present study similarly found anterior seat inclination to be associated with better postural stability, particularly in children with milder involvement.

### Upper Extremity Function and Seat Inclination

Significant differences were observed in selected upper extremity functional tasks across seating conditions. Functional Assessment Battery activities involving fine motor skills, bimanual coordination, and visual-motor integration demonstrated improved performance with anterior and neutral seating compared to posterior seating. Activity 7 (throwing a ball) showed greater throwing distance in anterior

seating, which may be attributed to improved trunk alignment, increased sitting height, and better lower limb support.

These findings are consistent with previous reports indicating faster task performance and improved reaching efficiency with anterior seat inclination compared to posterior inclination. The present study also demonstrated that time-based functional tasks were performed more efficiently in anterior and neutral seating conditions.

Several factors may have influenced task performance, including prior experience with functional activities, attention, motivation, fatigue, and fear associated with task execution. Additionally, many participants were classified as GMFCS levels I-II and had limited experience with wheelchair use, which may have affected scores related to wheelchair-based functional components.

Overall, anterior seat inclination may be beneficial for postural control and upper extremity function in children with spastic cerebral palsy.

### Limitations

The lengthy assessment protocol may have influenced performance due to fatigue and variable engagement. In addition, the predominance of participants classified as GMFCS levels I-II, with limited wheelchair experience, may have affected functional section scores of the Seated Postural Control Measure.

### Future Recommendations

Seat inclination may be considered as an adjunct to improve functional activity performance in children with spastic cerebral palsy.

### Clinical Implications

Given that children with cerebral palsy spend considerable time in sitting, particularly in school settings, a custom-built foam wedge with a 10° anterior or posterior seat inclination may be considered during functional activities to facilitate postural control and upper extremity function.

### Conclusion

Anterior and posterior seat inclinations were associated with statistically significant differences in postural control and upper extremity function, as reflected by improvements in SAS, SPCM, selected Functional Assessment Battery activities (4-7), and ABILHAND-Kids Questionnaire scores in children with spastic cerebral palsy.

**Ethical Clearance:** Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the Institutional Ethics Committee of The Oxford College of Physiotherapy. Approval was granted as per reference number TOCPTRBERS001/2022 dated 06 January 2022.

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**Conflict of Interest:** NIL

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