Extremely premature children at high risk of learning difficulties by age 11

March 11 2009

Children born extremely prematurely are at high risk of developing learning difficulties by the time they reach the age of 11.

A study carried out by the University of Warwick, in collaboration with University College London and the University of Nottingham, showed almost two thirds of children born extremely prematurely require additional support at school.

Extremely premature refers to children who are born below 26 weeks gestation.

Researchers looked at 307 extremely preterm children born in the UK and Ireland in 1995. 219 were re-assessed at 11 years of age and compared to 153 classmates born at term.

The researchers found extremely preterm children had significantly lower reading and maths scores than classmates. Also extremely preterm boys were more likely to have more serious impairments than girls.

This study, published today (10) in the Archives of Disease in Childhood Fetal Neonatal Edition , is the latest report from the EPICure study group. This group has produced two previous papers examining the children at aged two and a half and six years old.

Overall, just under half of the extremely premature children have serious disabilities, such as learning difficulties, cerebral palsy and impaired

vision or hearing.

Professor Dieter Wolke, from Warwick Medical School, said extremely premature birth placed children placed children at higher risk for cognitive and learning deficits affecting their schooling.

He said: "We found up to 44% of children had a serious impairment in core subjects such as reading and maths, and 50% had performance below the average range expected for their age. Extremely pre-term children have a 13-fold increased risk of special educational needs requiring additional learning support and were 77 times more likely to have an educational statement at 11 years of age."

The research team used standardised tests of cognitive ability and academic attainment, and teacher reports of school performance and special educational needs.

Professor Wolke added: "These problems we have identified at age 11 that impact on schooling are likely to increase over time. Existing difficulties may cause further problems when the children reach secondary school and engage in more complex academic activities."

Source: University of Warwick