

Tommy's Story

Deciding to make the transition from a walking frame to a wheelchair is not a decision made lightly, especially when you're already preoccupied with navigating the most formative years of your life.

But what may seem like a step backwards to others has been a massive leap forward for 14-year-old Tommy.



Case Study

Tommy Hill



Having lived with symptoms such as limited balance with no defined cause since birth, Tommy has relied on the use of walking aids and different orthoses to maintain mobility and assist his development as a growing child. Despite all this, Tommy takes on every challenge with his trademark optimism and cheeky smile, and with the help of his Steeper Orthotist, Rianna Thornton, he's achieving new goals consistently!

The Early Signs and Challenges

At just six weeks old, Tommy's mum, Rachel, noticed Tommy wasn't as active in his feet as his older brothers had been at the same age. She said, *"When I held Tommy as a baby, he didn't press into me with his feet, he wasn't bouncing around, and he struggled with weight-bearing. The doctor brushed it off at the six-week check-up, saying there was no problem. But when you know, you know, so we kept an eye on it."* At 18 months old, with symptoms still presenting, Tommy started receiving private physio care and his mobility journey began.

The family searched for answers through multiple physiotherapy sessions, blood tests, MRI scans, and the trialling of different orthotic devices. Frustratingly, test after test returned normal results, minor damage to his brain was noted but an official diagnosis would never materialise.

At around three years old, Tommy received his first pair of Pedro Boots to help support the development of his feet, before eventually transitioning into Steeper Made to Measure Ankle Foot Orthoses (AFOs) to aid him at school. It's always been something that, in his words, he's *"just got on with."*

Using AFOs to Navigate School Life

Rachel said, *"Tommy was the only walking frame user at his school and they were really good at adapting things for him, but I still worried. I'm in awe of him because he is just so positive. Young children are the best for inclusion too, if Tommy couldn't participate in something they'd join him on the carpet to play instead and not think anything of it."*

Tommy recalls a specific day at school when he and his classmates were preparing for their upcoming sports day. Despite his inability to walk unaided, Tommy wanted to participate in the running race and wouldn't let anything keep him from doing so. He said, *"My teacher turned to me and said I'm in charge of the lesson today! I was so excited*

when he said he wanted me to teach everyone how to crawl for the new crawling race." Sports day came and went with his friends joining him for the crawl and the whole school chanting Tommy's name as he crossed the finish line!

Supporting Tommy's Growth and Mobility

Since finding himself at a Steeper orthotic clinic over 10 years ago, Tommy has tried multiple styles of AFOs. With his decision to ditch the tiresome walking frame for a more energy-efficient wheelchair comes another change in orthoses. His new AFOs are shorter to accommodate a permanent sitting position.

Steeper Orthotist Rianna Thorton said, *"Tommy's new AFOs are designed specifically for control and proprioceptive feedback, rather than gait support now that he uses a wheelchair. He does overpronate, so having an orthosis that supports his feet in a neutral alignment not only benefits him when transferring from his chair, reducing his chance of injury but also helps to prevent deterioration of his feet and ankles in the future."*

Staying Positive and Looking Forward

Not only has the family donated many of Tommy's unused orthotic devices to international charities, but he also raises money to purchase clothes for his local clothes bank Christmas appeal every year firstly by standing, then walking 10 steps a day unaided, and eventually swimming laps - a huge feat for Tommy raising over £3,500 last year alone! Charitable donations are just one of the things he does to stay positive. Tommy was never afraid to play out with his friends and now navigates his way to and from school on his own. He says, *"At the end of the day, it doesn't matter what people might think, you have to go and smash it for yourself."*

Rachel is passionate about campaigning for accessibility, not only in the way of ramps and accessible bathrooms but also in attitudes towards people who may use a wheelchair or walking frame. She says, *"Tommy and other people like him have so much to offer! As soon as you get to know him you understand that he doesn't let his wheelchair limit him, with a little bit of tweaking, he'll give anything a try!"*

To read Tommy's full story, visit www.steepergroup.com