

When a Parent Loses a Limb: Helping Children Cope

by Pat Isenberg, ACA Outreach
Education Coordinator

- Common questions that children ask include: Where is your arm/leg? What happened to it? Did it break off? Be prepared to assist the child with an answer that is appropriate for his or her age and developmental level.
 - Does it hurt? Pain is scary to children; the longer pain endures, the more frightened the child will be. Talk about different types of pain in terms the child can understand. (Remember the time you burned your finger? Or, the time you fell off your bike?) Remind the child that sometimes pain is short-lived; at other times, pain lasts for days, but eventually pain gets better.
 - Avoid giving children too much information, such as details about a complicated disease process or the amputation surgery.
 - Can this happen to me? Alleviate fears by giving information that kids can understand. Telling a child that someone was asleep when his or her leg was removed can develop into a fear of bedtime. Remember that your explanations need to be planned to avoid creating additional fears or anxiety.
 - Is this my fault? Younger children are egocentric; when things happen, they feel responsible. Make certain children know that they did not do anything to make this happen.
 - Limb loss is not a punishment; however, if it's the result of an accident, you may want to talk about safety issues at an appropriate time.
 - Children will not "catch" this. Hugging and touching are still safe and very important parts of healing for the entire family.
 - The parent is still a mommy or daddy regardless of the limb difference. Talk about what is important - daddy can still read a bedtime story; mommy will still brush your hair.
 - You may also want to discuss which things may be different. Mom may have to learn a new way to bake chocolate chip cookies; dad may not be able to walk the dog for a few weeks (or months).
 - Call upon the child's natural desire to help. You can be mommy's right hand until she learns to use the new one.
 - Explain the new words: prosthesis, limb, residual limb, prosthetist. Make a game out of spelling or pronunciation of these words.
 - Avoid adverse reactions: a child who cries or screams in response to seeing a parent for the first time; a child who runs from the room each time the prosthesis is removed. Explain differences in advance to prepare the child. Show pictures of other people with limb loss
- (available from the prosthetist or therapist or *inMotion* magazine) to desensitize the child.
- Focus on the similarities, but prepare gently for the differences. Have the child talk or write about his or her feelings.
 - Children are curious. Remove the mystery from the prosthesis by asking the prosthetist to spend time with the child, explaining the materials and components used. The child should be encouraged to manipulate the components.
 - If possible, have the child talk with other children whose parents have lost a limb.
 - Encourage the child to express his or her feelings through drawing, poetry, or telling and writing a story.

Excerpt from Limb Loss Education & Awareness Program, ©2001 Amputee Coalition of America