

## FACT SHEET 11

# Assisting Students to Understand Limb Difference

It is important to remember that your child's limb difference may be difficult to understand or distressing for some student peers. This is particularly true for children of a young age and can be more challenging if your child is returning to kindergarten, pre-school or school after an amputation.

Try to ensure that the school is working with you to support all the students to learn about your child's limb difference in a positive way. Addressing this matter early will influence positive acceptance of your child's physical difference by their peers and within the wider school community. Some schools will never have encountered limb difference before, in which case it will be a learning experience for you all.

This Fact Sheet provides some tips for ensuring that your child's peers understand your child's limb difference and positively support him or her at school (or in sporting and social groups).

## Discuss disclosure with your child and teachers

It is important that your child's teachers understand his or her limb difference and promote inclusion and diversity in the classroom. You may want to discuss the type of limb difference terminology that the teacher uses within the classroom and ensure that he or she uses language you are comfortable with. For example, your child's teacher may use the word 'amputee' when you would prefer that the term 'limb difference' is used. Once your child's teacher is aware of the terms you and your child are most comfortable with, the greater the likelihood that this will be the language used by your student peers.

Some children do not want the school or parents to specifically discuss their limb difference with student peers, and instead talk about it in their own time and independent of adults. That is fine and is a suitable approach for some children and young people. However, other children may want to have their limb difference disclosed and discussed with student peers. In these instances the child or young person may want a teacher or a parent to assist or they may want to handle it on their own.

## Conduct a session about limb difference

You may want to ask the school whether an information session about limb difference can be conducted with your child's peers. The school should only hold a session with you and your child's permission.

Before talking to students, you should consider their age and maturity – and anticipate difficult questions they might ask – before starting the discussion.

Whether it is the teacher, you or your child conducting the session some discussion points to consider are: discussing your child's limb difference; dispelling any myths or worries that peers may have (eg. a common question among younger peers can be "Will I catch it?"); reinforcing your child's abilities; and, explaining whether there is any specific assistance your child has and how peers can support. You may also want to consider bringing along prosthetic limbs, books or other pieces of equipment to show to peers.

## Preparing for a presentation

When responding to questions from students you may want to cover a number of topics. Whether you utilise these will be dependent on the age of the students.

Topics may include:

- > Explain why your child has limb difference
- > Point out that, while your child has a limb difference, they are more alike than different
- > Highlight that your child can do all or most of the things that other children can do
- > Use your preferred language and words and provide brief definitions or explanations if required
- > Affirm and minimise any fears that students may have in a sympathetic manner

## Prepare for questions that students may ask

Students are likely to be inquisitive and want to ask questions to better understand your child's limb difference. Types of questions often resemble the following ones:

*"What's wrong with Andy's leg?"*

*"Why is Jane's arm different to mine?"*

*"Johnny has no leg so does that mean I won't have mine one day too?"*

*"Why doesn't Charlotte have a foot?"*

There are a number of ways you might tackle common questions from students, depending on their ages and whether your child wants to be part of the presentation. Some approaches include:

**Diversification.** *"You're right Mary, Andy's leg is different to yours. But mine is also different to yours. How is mine different Mary's?"*

**Focus on similarities rather than differences.** *"That's right Sam, Jane's arm is different to yours. But Jane can still do most of the things you can do. Did you know that Jane can tie her shoelace just as you can? Jane also loves to draw pictures and I heard that you like to draw pictures too? Jane loves riding her bike, do you like riding bikes too Sam?"*

**Reducing fears.** *"Peter, Johnny is missing the lower part of his leg because he had an accident when he was young. It is very unusual for children to have accidents like that so you should try not to worry that it will happen to you. Did you realise that Johnny uses a prosthetic leg which basically replaces his missing leg and because of that he is able to ride his bike and even play football".*

**Educating children about limb difference (often used with older children).** *"That's right Chris, Charlotte doesn't have as many toes as you because she was born that way. But Charlotte can still do many of the things you can do, can't you Charlotte?"*

Communicating with students through positive words helps them to understand your child's limb difference and that the world is made up of interesting and unique individuals. By helping children to understand, in a tactful and age-appropriate manner, there is a much greater chance that your child's limb difference will be positively accepted by his or her peers.

## Use a 'buddy system'

If a 'buddy system' doesn't already exist in your child's school, you might want to ask the school to appoint a volunteer 'peer buddy' for your child. Buddies are particularly valuable if a child is returning to school after an amputation and 'getting used' to being back at school.

## Accessing support

Assisting your child's peers to understand your son or daughter's limb difference may lead to some questions or concerns. You may want to speak to a Limbs 4 Kids team member who can assist you. You may also want to speak to another parent who has experienced what you are going through. If so, Limbs 4 Kids can connect you to a trained Peer Support Volunteer who you can speak to you. Visit our website or call us for more information and links to our online support.

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The Limbs 4 Kids program is an initiative of Limbs 4 Life, Australia's peak organisation for amputees and persons living with limb difference. Limbs 4 Kids ensures that all Australian children and young people with limb difference, as well as all of those who care for them, receive access to information and support.

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