

# When a Parent Loses a Limb or Loss of Normal Ability...

**It can prove to be a very scary thing when a parent loses the ability to interact as they use to with a child due to loss of a limb. It can frighten children and is often hard for them to understand. Being prepared to help children adjust can alleviate stress and anxiety from the already sensitive situation.**

- **Where is your arm/leg? What happened to it? Did it break off?** Be prepared to help the child with an answer that is appropriate for his or her age. Avoid giving children too much information, such as details about a complicated disease or the amputation surgery.
- **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, the pain gets better.
- **Can this happen to me?** Alleviate fears by giving information that kids can understand. A child who hears that someone was asleep when his or her leg was removed may develop a fear of bedtime. Remember that your explanations need to be planned to avoid creating additional fears or anxiety.
- **Is this my fault?** When things happen, children feel they are responsible. Make certain children know that they did not do anything to cause the amputation.

## **Things to Remember**

- **Limb loss is not a punishment.** However, if it was the result of an accident, you may want to talk about safety issues with the child at an appropriate time.
- **The child will not "catch" this.** Hugging and touching are still safe and very important parts of healing for the entire family.
- **The parent is still Mommy or Daddy regardless of the limb difference.** Talk about what is important—Daddy can still read a bedtime story, and Mommy can still brush your hair.



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*Promoting Healthy Social Behaviors in Child Care Centers*

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Continued.....

- **Things may be different.** Mom may have to learn a new way to bake chocolate chip cookies, and Dad may not be able to walk the dog for a few weeks (or months).
- **Call upon the child's natural desire to help.** Tell the child he or she can be Mommy's right hand until she learns to use the new one.
- **Explain the new words.** Make a game out of spelling and pronouncing the words that have become a new part of your vocabulary, such as prosthesis, socket, limb, residual limb and prosthesis.
- **Avoid adverse reactions, such as a child who cries or screams in response to seeing a parent for the first time after limb loss or a child who runs from the room each time the prosthesis is removed.** Explain the differences in advance to prepare the child. Show pictures of other people with limb loss (available from the prosthetic doctor 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 doctor 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.**



Adapted from Helen Osborne 2006, *When a Parent Loses a Limb*, [www.healthliteracy.com](http://www.healthliteracy.com)