

# Growing up with a disability

**Growing up can be pretty tough. Your body is changing; your feelings can be quite confused. School can be hard going. Are you ever going to get a job, live on your own, have cool friends, meet someone that you can fall in love with, have children? Are you ever going to understand your parents and are they ever going to understand you? Are your parents ever going to let you out of their sight long enough for you to meet someone you can fall in love with?**

Every young person has some of these feelings at some time when they are growing



up. If you have a disability, it can seem as if the whole world is trying to stop you from growing up.

Here other young disabled people pass on their tips about dealing with some of the toughest bits of growing up.

## Meeting people and making friends

If you are stuck in the house most of the time it can make you feel quite lonely. Maybe you feel that your parents don't understand that you need to be with other young people. If you feel that you need to get out more, see if your parents will help you to find out about clubs, activities or sports that you could join in. You may find that your parents are worried about you. It is parents' job to worry – it is your job to convince them that you are responsible and trustworthy.

Some tips on dealing with your parents –

- Take their worries seriously. If, for example, they are worried that you forget to take any medicine, convince them that you know what to take and when to take it.
- Explain to them that you are not intending to get pregnant, make anyone else pregnant, take drugs or do anything else that they imagine you will be doing once you are out of the front door
- Let them meet your friends to be reassured that you are in safe hands
- Come back when you say you will, even if you are having a great time
- Let them pick you up from wherever you going if they want to. You can always ask

them to wait round the corner to avoid embarrassing you

- Compromise. If you want to go white water rafting, it's probably not a good idea to tell them this straight away. Start with a trip to the local swimming pool. Once they see that you can be trusted with small things they may be more open to your grander plans.

If your disability means that it really isn't possible for you to get out more (and most people can overcome most things, so don't give up too easily), then you may be able to make friends in other ways.

You may also use the Internet to chat with other young disabled people, but do be very careful. Sometimes adults use these chat rooms to talk to young people and pretend to be the same age in order to get them to swap secrets and talk about private things. You should be very careful using the Internet and never ever give out your phone number or address or agree to meet someone without your parents being there.

### **Making friends**

Making friends and getting a boyfriend or girlfriend, is not always easy and someone needs to make the first move. Some people may feel shy or awkward about approaching



you. Should they ask about your disability? Should they look at you in the eyes? You may think they are not interested or critical and they may want to approach you but feel embarrassed. Here are a few tips:

- Make eye contact and smile
- Say something as soon as the opportunity arises
- Pick something out about them or the situation and ask them a question which needs a response e.g. "I like your trousers, where did you get them from?"; "Do you know who won the football"....
- Sound interested when they speak to you
- Speak confidently

### **Keeping friends**

- Be yourself, and if they are worth it they will respect you for it
- Learn to chill out - if you are relaxed they will feel relaxed in your company.
- Learn how to be assertive – stand up for yourself in a friendly way
- Believe in yourself and proud of the things that you can do
- Accept compliments
- Don't give yourself a hard time
- Be interested in your friends

### **Close friendships**

Successful close friendships start with casual friendships where two people meet and think they share some interests, like what each other has to say, laugh at the same things. Remember appearances can be deceptive and we all need to know someone before we can decide whether the friendship will become close. You need to know that you would get on well and have similar interests. If that is the case and you would like to see them again or find out if they feel the same

way. Let them know in a relaxed and non-threatening way. You could say one of the following

- “I hope I’ll see you again”
- “I’ve really enjoyed talking to you. Will you be coming here again?”

Looking or acting desperate is not a good way to make friends or a boyfriend/girlfriend. Take it slowly and let a friendship develop over time.

### Dealing with Difficult Situations

If you have to deal with stares, comments, teasing or even worse bullying try the following:

If you think that you are being ‘got at’, think positive – think to yourself:

- “They’re just mucking around”
- “I can handle this by being friendly”

Tell yourself something reassuring:

- “I’m OK and I’ll show them what I’m really like”
- “There’s more to me than my disability”
- “I can cope with this”

If that does not work... distract yourself...

- Listen to your iPod or sing a song in your head
- Think about something good

Use the following to look confident – even if you don’t feel it:

- Look people in the eye
- Use your voice – a bright, confident voice holds people’s attention

Tell other people why you look different with a short simple explanation. For example:

- “It’s just the way I was born – it’s no big deal”
- “I have stiff joints – don’t worry about it”



- “It’s just the way my face/back/arms/hands/legs/feet... are”

Change the subject... ask about their holidays, hobbies, their other friends – anything that takes the attention off you

- “Are you going to watch X-Factor tonight?”
- “Did you see the football match last night?”

Try these ways of sticking up for yourself:

- “I don’t have to listen to this”. (Then move away)
- “My arms/legs might look odd, but I can still hear alright”
- “That’s a pretty stupid thing to say”

### Feeling good about yourself and how you look

You can concentrate on helping yourself feel good about your WHOLE appearance.

This can boost your self-confidence. Here are some ideas from other young people:

- Try a new hairstyle
- Experiment with your makeup
- Eat a healthy diet
- Get some exercise if you can. More and more gyms are becoming accessible to disabled people and there are many sports that you can try. This is also a way of meeting new people.
- Get enough sleep. It will help you look healthy and stops you falling asleep in class or at work
- Wear clothes that you feel good in (you can always swap or borrow your mate's clothes if you can't afford new ones)
- Remember to smile – its good for you and other people
- Maintain eye contact when talking to other people
- Let other people see your inner qualities too (e.g. that you are kind or thoughtful or fun to be with). It is all these things that make you what you are, and this is what people really notice (especially in the long run).



**The Arthrogyrosis Group** | 45 Milton Road | Hanwell | London | W7 1LQ

Tel: 0800 028 4447 | [www.taguk.org.uk](http://www.taguk.org.uk)

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