

Dear Parents,

August 31, 2004

My name is Stephanie Pitzman and my daughter Megan is in Mrs. McLean's kindergarten class this year. I already know many of you and some of you know Megan from preschool or community programs. I'm writing this letter because many of Megan's classmates don't know her and they will probably be curious about the fact that she has only one hand. It is important to us that the students are comfortable with her limb difference. In an effort to satisfy your child's natural curiosity and keep awkward situations to a minimum, I'd like to tell you a little bit about Megan and offer suggestions about what to say to kids who wonder about her missing hand.

First of all, this is the way Megan was born. Her amputation was most likely due to amniotic banding in the very early stages of pregnancy. Suffice it to say, this event occurs when a body part gets tangled in amniotic tissue which restricts its growth. This is easily translated to kids as, "That's the way she was born. Her arm didn't grow quite right when she was in her mommy's tummy." Some children hear the physical explanation and go about their business without second thoughts. At this age though, it's more common they will want more details. You've heard it a million times, "why...why... why?" ☺

The easiest way to help a child understand something like this is to remind them how we are all different from each other. You can engage them in this conversation by pointing out the obvious differences...hair, eyes, glasses, tall, short, skin color, size of feet, etc. The list is endless. It's also a good idea to explain that Megan's arm is not broken, painful, shameful, sad or frightening. It is simply different. While it is unique, she doesn't consider it "special" and we do not refer to it as such. Sometimes children will also be concerned about how Megan will do certain things with only one hand. I usually remind them that she does all the same things they do....just in different ways. She's never had two hands so she learns to do everything with one. Questions they have about "how" she does things will be answered naturally when they see Megan in action.

Once you get to know Megan it's easy to forget she has only one hand. She is a determined young lady who adapts easily. She wears two mittens in winter, washes both "hands," rides a bike without adaptive handle bars, pours her own drinks, climbs like a monkey, and successfully learned to tie her shoes one-handed last fall. She refers to her left arm as her "short arm" or "little arm" and she uses the end of it just as the rest of us use our hand...painting with it, getting it in the dirt, holding things, clapping, making "hand"prints, etc. There are tasks she gets frustrated with but most of the time she takes her challenges in stride and manages creatively.

Megan usually handles questions from her peers fairly well but is easily intimidated by older kids' comments and inquiries about her arm. The thing that bothers her most is when people touch her short arm inappropriately. It happens more often than people would imagine and I believe it occurs almost unconsciously in most cases. Some children are so overwhelmed with curiosity that they instinctively reach out and grab Megan's handless arm. She has had people squeeze, twist, and poke her short arm, and even those who grimace rudely as they grope for a closer look. This is absolutely NOT ok and the invasion sometimes scares Meg. I think this issue is best addressed in a general discussion about personal space and keeping your hands to yourself. We have also experienced the opposite reaction, kids who are afraid of Megan's difference. They may not want to stand or sit next to her, avoid holding "hands" with her during circle activities, or they make "yucky," "gross," or "scary" comments. Obviously, this is upsetting for Meg, but it is a natural reaction for some kids.

I encourage you to share any questions or concerns with me that you or your child may have regarding Meg's limb difference. You might ask your son or daughter if they've already met Megan. Regardless of whether they have or not, you can share some of this information with them to help eliminate the mystery. If your child is afraid, please let Mrs. McLean or I know so we can deal with it right away. Megan usually doesn't mind people asking about her hand and she is especially proud to show off her new baby brother who has a short left arm just like hers. He's 3 months old and was a surprise addition to our family through an amazing adoption opportunity.

I just wanted to let you know that I welcome conversation about my daughter and I look forward to getting to know you and your child.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Pitzman