

INTRODUCTION

Hi and welcome to the Cerebral Palsy Foundation's ParentWise Podcast series. I'm Robyn Cummins.

In this podcast, youth worker Peter Horsley shares his insights about how parents can help their teenagers with a disability develop the all-important sense of belonging.

THE TEENAGE YEARS

The teenage years can be a restless and sometimes tumultuous time for families. During childhood, parents generally are the most significant influence on their children. As they get older, children start to focus much more on the connections and relationships with their peers. You'll find that peers can take over as the most influential people in your teenager's life.

Social contact is important for any young person. It's crucial for all of us but particularly so in the teenage years. With social relationships may come the opportunity to build self-confidence and develop friendships.

The teenage years are formative for a young person's identity. There's a change in their awareness of who they are and this is interwoven with the physiological changes and external influences such as their peer group.

As parents we know how important it is to try to help our teenagers to develop and maintain a positive sense of their own identity during this time. One way you can foster this is by encouraging them to look at the things that are good about themselves and in the others around them.

For kids with a disability there are a whole lot of things that are exactly the same for any other teenager their age, such as the desire for deeper friendships, the desire to be accepted and the desire to do the right things, wear the right things and say the right things.

While there can be many commonalities between the experiences of young people with and without disability during this life stage, there are undoubtedly extra pressures on young people with a disability.

This is a time when what's accepted by peers and what's not, can become critical to a young person's sense of who they are.

HOW CAN YOU HELP YOUR TEENAGER?

So, how can you help the teenager in your family to develop healthy friendships and relationships? And how important is it for your teenager to develop friendships with a wide range of young people, including those who are sharing similar challenges?

Friends are usually people we can trust and respect and who like them for who they are - and of course this applies to any young person with a disability.

Friends help us to know we're OK even when we're going through our darker times. We can trust them with deep things that might be going on in our life or the pressures that we might be dealing with.

Your teenager needs to come to understand that a true friend is someone you can completely be yourself with and vice versa.

Some people with a disability have no other friends with a disability. Some other teenagers don't know any people without a disability. There are negatives and positives in both situations.

The trend towards inclusion means there is now greater awareness and acceptance of people with a disability in the community. By having some friends without a disability, people with a disability learn the skills to interact with a wider range of people.

Sometimes there are barriers that stop young people with a disability forming close relationships with those who do not have a disability. For example, sometimes teenagers may want to go out at the drop of a hat and don't give much thought to planning ahead. This can be tough for a teenager in a wheelchair for example, who has issues with accessibility and transport. But friendships are often forged through these shared experiences, so it's important that parents try to support these spontaneous events so their teenager can be part of the group.

It's important for your child to have friends with a disability as well. Amongst their peers with a disability they will often find a different level of acceptance and a different level of understanding than from others.

Young people with a disability often tell me that their other friends with a disability 'get me for who I am' in a way that their friends without a disability don't. Often, young people with a disability who have mostly able-bodied friends report feelings of having to keep up with their friends or having to tuck their disability away. They feel like they have to physically and emotionally overcompensate to make sure that their disability isn't the focus.

There's no right or wrong answer here. Friends can be people you see everyday or people you may only see a couple of times a year. The important thing is that you find people that you connect with and click with.

What you hope to achieve is having a teenager who has a few good friends (whether they have a disability or not) and that the teenager is comfortable in their own skin.

That young person will have come to terms with their disability to the extent that they are content with themselves and can take an interest in other people. Even if your child has not yet reached this stage, then encouraging them to move their focus onto an interest in others can take the pressure off their 'own performance'. They do this by asking others how they are, remembering previous conversations and by showing a concern for the other person.

Perhaps most importantly, people with a variety of friends are willing to try new things even if these situations or experiences are sometimes uncomfortable. Parents can play a role here by letting their children try new experiences even if that sometimes means they may face disappointment. Unconsciously, many parents are overprotective of their teenage children and particularly if they have a disability. Parents don't want to see their children try something and fail. But the teenage years are a time when kids experiment and often that means trying things that do fail.

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What else can parents do without interfering in this experimentation process to help their children build strong and healthy friendships with their peers?

Ultimately it's all about giving your teenager the space to be their own person. Young people with a disability are like any other teenager.

The teenage years are a time to let them go and try some things on their own.

Finding out what interests your child and encouraging them to join groups is one essential strategy for giving your child space and assisting them to feel good about themselves.

Secondly, enable your teenager to access the different communication technologies that are out there, such as texting. After all, a mobile phone to a teenager is like a social life in their pocket. Social networking websites like Facebook, Bebo, MySpace, Livewire and other digital media are part of the social fabric for teenagers.

Speaking to peers with and without a disability is incredibly important to your teenager's formation of identity. Encourage them to regularly communicate with their peers by facilitating some kind of connection outside of school, be it face to face or online.

Parents can sometimes overlook the social and emotional development of their teenagers because there so many other things that demand their attention – care needs, transport, school work and other siblings.

Teenagers' hobbies and interests, social networks and identity may be forgotten in the struggle to get from one day to the next. Overlooking these aspects of your child's character and development can affect their success at school. It also affects their ability to feel good about themselves and to get out into the community.

Talking to other parents with children with a disability who are dealing with same issues will also help you to develop strategies to manage the life stage you and your family are going through.

Finding your own sense of belonging by sharing with other parents, either formally through a parent group, or informally, will help your teenager to develop a sense of belonging too.

CLOSE

Thanks for listening. We hope you've found these strategies and ideas useful.

You can download or listen to more episodes in the ParentWise Podcast series at the Cerebral Palsy Foundation's website at www.cpfoundation.com.au