

## INTRODUCTION

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

Today, Kate Hooke, consultant social worker, examines how to best handle your child's growing awareness of their disability.

## THE FIRST QUESTIONS

Hi. I'm Kate Hooke a consultant social worker with over 15 years experience working in the area of disability and health.

Children are naturally curious about the way the world works.

As your child gets older they will become more aware of their disability and how it affects their every day life.

As a result they will probably start asking you, as their parent or carer, more and more questions about their disability.

They may also experience emotions ranging from frustration to anger to sadness to confusion.

It is so important for children to be able to express these emotions and ask questions related to them and to receive respectful and honest answers.

For example, a mother once told me that her son had asked her, 'If I can't walk can I still get a wife?' The mother was saddened by this question and also a little unsure how to answer her son.

If you and your extended family can prepare for situations such as these by arming yourself with the right facts and an open approach, it will be much easier for everyone.

It's often helpful if to look for naturally occurring opportunities to give children age-appropriate information throughout their childhood, building upon their knowledge, layer upon layer as you go.

When I think about this process I think of a painting made up of many interlinked brush strokes.

This is in stark contrast to the more formal 'sit your kid down at the age of 13 and give them the talk' method.

You may have experienced a similar 'talk' somewhere along the line and will know how overwhelming and a little frightening it can be.

Most likely, you had already picked up clues about the issue from a number of situations and people along the way.

The same goes for children finding out about disabilities.

## YOUR MESSAGE

The last thing many parents want is for their child to get questionable, second-hand information about their disability from another child at school. It is so important to ensure that your child gets accurate information about their disability and how it impacts on them.

As a parent, usually the best way to achieve this is by taking control of the information your child receives by giving the information yourself.

But in order to have a conversation with your child about their disability, and how it affects them, you need to have a good grasp of these concepts yourself.

You also need to translate these concepts into language that's age or developmentally appropriate for your child.

Most importantly, your child will take cues about their disability from you.

They also need you to model for them how to tell people about their disability.

If parents use negative language to talk about their child's disability, or other disabilities, then children will pick up on that.

Instead, aim to balance the information children are given, such as what is difficult for them and what they are good at.

For example, 'Well, cerebral palsy may make it tiring for you to walk a long distance but it certainly doesn't impact on your ability to thrash me at Monopoly!'

Many children need to be helped to come up with their story of what their disability is and how it impacts on them.

For example, 'I have brain damage so I can't walk' could be a red flag for schoolyard bullying! An alternative could be, 'The muscles in my legs are tight, which makes it hard for me to walk'.

It can also be useful for kids to have a number of explanations for what their disability is and how it affects them - a more detailed one for close friends who are important to them and a brief one liner for kids in the playground who might ask.

A 'brush off' message for sticky beaks on the street may also come in handy.

As your child gets older it's also useful to 'arm' them with information about misconceptions or misunderstandings relating to their disability as they will almost certainly come across these from other people or in the media.

## BE PREPARED

Be prepared. Children will ask questions and sometimes those questions will be confronting or even upsetting for you.

Children need to think they can ask any questions, including questions that they think may upset their parents. It can be useful if children have trusted adults other than their parents to ask questions of. As a parent it can be helpful to help your child identify who might be a good person, as an alternative to you, to talk to.

It's important that children have the opportunity to ask these kinds of questions and find out this information so that:

- They understand what their disability is and how it impacts on them in order to explain it to their friends
- They don't feel disempowered because everyone else seems to know more about their disability than they do
- They don't feel people are hiding information from them about their disability and how it impacts on them. If they feel that information is being hidden, some children will conclude that it's because having a disability is bad or that they are bad for having a disability.

Of course, if you're unsure of how to approach talking to your child about their disability you can always contact your local disability service provider for more information and advice.

## 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 - [www.cpfoundation.com.au](http://www.cpfoundation.com.au)