

When a Grandparent Loses a Limb

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Children may ask:

- **Where is your arm/leg?** What happened to it? Did it break off? Be prepared to assist 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 the pain lasts, 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; at other times, pain lasts for days; but the pain gets better in the end..
- **Can this happen to me?** Help with the fears by giving children information that they 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 they did not do anything to cause the amputation.

Things to Remember

- **Avoid adverse reactions.** Avoid the potential situation of the child crying or screaming in response to seeing your residual limb for the first time by preparing the child in advance. Show pictures of other people with limb loss to help the child adjust. Explain that even though you look different, you are still normal.
- **Encourage open discussion.** Ask the child to talk about his or her feelings and worries. If he or she is uncomfortable, suggest writing or even drawing to express his or her feelings.
- **Limb loss is not a punishment.** Grandma did not lose her leg because she is a bad person. Depending upon the child's age, however, you may want to discuss lifestyle changes that might have prevented the amputation.
- **The child will not “catch” this.** Hugging and touching are still safe and very important parts of healing for the entire family.
- **Everything's different, but nothing has changed.** Focus on the familiar, but prepare gently for the differences. For example, Grandpa or Grandma may not be able to walk the dog for a few weeks (or months). However, you are still the child's grandparent regardless of the limb difference. Talk about what is important: You can still read a bedtime story or brush hair.
- **Call upon the child's natural desire to help.** Tell your grandchild that he or she can be Granny's legs until you learn to use the new ones.
- **Explain the new words.** Make a game out of spelling and pronouncing the words that have become a new part of your language, such as prosthesis, socket, residual limb, and prosthetist.
- **Children are curious.** Remove the mystery from the prosthesis by asking the prosthetist to spend time with the child, explaining the materials and components used. The child should be encouraged to manipulate the components.