



Aussie Hands

Supporting Australians who
have a hand difference

Kindergarten and School Starter Resource Kit For Parents



www.aussiehands.org

Starting kindergarten and school is a significant milestone in the life of a child. For children with hand differences and their parents, it can be a time full of questions and uncertainty.

This kit aims to make the transition to kindergarten or school a little easier. It includes some of the most frequently asked questions and practical advice from parents who have been there.

We encourage you to reflect on the information provided and to make a decision based on what best suits you and your child.

How do I approach the relationship with my child's teacher and kindergarten/school?

A good relationship starts with open communication. The class teacher is key to a child's successful transition to kindergarten and school. From the outset foster a good relationship with the teacher and maintain it by staying in touch and being available for advice if needed.

Encourage the teacher to come to you throughout the year if they have any issues or concerns.

"Making yourself available and involved in what your child is doing at school and keeping communication open by "checking in" every now and then is a good thing."

– An Aussie Hands parent

Should I talk to the teacher about my child's hand difference before the start of the kindergarten/school year?

Yes. It's a good idea to contact your child's teacher before the kindergarten/school year starts. Talk to them about your child's hand difference and raise anything you think the teacher should be aware of.

"I found it was good to have a brief conversation early about the hand difference. It made me feel more at ease that the staff were looking out for her. The teaching staff have been interested to learn about hand differences – no teachers I have come across yet had seen it before."

– An Aussie Hands parent



What types of things should I mention to the teacher to ensure the best support for my child?

Let the teacher know that your child is capable and able to do all the things that other children do. Your child might do some tasks differently, but they can master them all the same. Advise the teacher to encourage your child to do things independently, which will support the development of their skills. Suggest the child be the guide and they only step in to help if other options have failed.

Inform the teacher about any tasks you feel your child may need support with, for example, tying up shoelaces. Go over any aids or gadgets they have and how and when they are used.

“We went through amenities (toilet, water fountain), left-handed scissors and other equipment in the classroom.... I also discussed things she needed help with (putting on jumper) and requested special approval from the principal that she can wear Velcro shoes (not shoelace ones like everyone else has to)”.

– An Aussie Hands parent

You can also talk to the teacher about what words you and your child feel most comfortable using to describe their hand difference. For example, “hand difference” or “little hand”. Explain to the teacher if there is a specific term that your child uses.

“My daughter said two kids asked what happened to her hand and she said “I was born like this, I didn’t grow my fingers properly when I was in my mummy’s tummy” and the kids just said “oh, ok” and they played together.”

– An Aussie Hands parent

What can I do to prepare my child before they begin kindergarten/school?

Children are naturally curious. They want to know “why”? They will ask your child why they have a different hand. It is a good idea to ensure your child has a response which they feel comfortable using. This might be something along the lines of “I have a big and a little hand, this was the way I came out of mummy’s tummy”.

“Other children often ask my daughter about her limb difference at school. She practiced explaining it to kids before she started so she would be used to that.”

– An Aussie Hands parent

On a more practical level, think about what activities that your child will be required to do at kindergarten and school and support them to practice before commencing. For example, many parents have got their child to practice cutting paper with scissors and taking their shoes on and off.

Should I introduce the topic of hand difference to my child’s class?

It’s a personal decision and one to be made after thinking about what would be best for your child.

Most parents find addressing the issue of difference to be positive because it allows the discussion to be guided by an adult, rather than peers in the playground.



How else can the topic of hand difference can be introduced to my child's class?

Some approaches are specific to hand difference and others more generally address the topic of difference.

Hand difference specific methods include getting an adult to talk to the class about hand difference. This could be a parent, the teacher or an adult living with a hand difference. (Contact Aussie Hands to see if a member could do this).

Your child could also talk to the class if they want to. This approach would suit a child who is confident and doesn't mind being the centre of attention and being bombarded with questions.

Various resources to be included in talks can be found in the Aussie Hands website (reference 1). You could also show YouTube videos, read books and talk about inspirational people such as Aussie Hands Patron Kate Doughty.

Focussing more generally on diversity and difference puts hand difference on the agenda in a non-confrontational way. It would suit self-conscious children and those who don't like the spotlight.

One way to do this is to get the class to discuss the topic of "what makes us different"? This could involve one child saying he is Italian or has red hair. The main conversation that the parent or teacher should emphasise is that we are all different and this is ok. Different is normal.

"The teacher asked the class about what makes you different and special? Mike was unaware of this activity and to my amazement his response was, MY HAND!! This made me smile and tear up all at the same time."

– An Aussie Hands parent

How do I make a storybook to introduce my child to their peers?

You can create a storybook of your child's life to read and show to the class by either yourself or the teacher. This can be a good approach if your child has had (or is soon to have) toe to hand surgery, as you can explain the process with photos and words. A storybook is particularly useful for younger children who are commencing kindergarten.

Things to include are pictures and words about when your child was born, what active things they like doing, the interests they have as well as pictures of your family. Make sure the book focuses on more than just your child's hand difference.

"I spoke to the teacher and asked if I could chat to the kindy class one day about Ann's hand. I did up some photos to show them what she looked like when she was born and after her operation. I included photos of kids in wheelchairs and other differences. It highlighted there are different kinds of people and that we need to be kind to one another."

– An Aussie Hands parent

If you don't want to make your own, a good storybook example is on the website **Born Just Right**. It's about a girl named Jordon. Her mum said she wrote the book to share with Jordan's class and the other Kindergarten classes. You can find a copy on the Born Just Right website (reference 2).



How about writing a letter of introduction, to be given to my child's peers and parents?

Writing a letter to introduce your child to their peers and their parents is recommended by many Aussie Hands families. Benefits include informing the parents so they can talk to their child about the topic of hand difference.

Ask that the letter be given to each family to take home. As with the storybook, make the letter about more than just hand difference. Include a range of information about your child, what they like to do, what they are good at and some photos.

Here is the letter written by Aussie Hands Mum Toni for her child Jessica before she started school:

Hi, my name is Jessica and I am excited about starting prep next year. I am writing this letter so you will know about my little hand before you meet me. I was born without any thumb or fingers on my left hand. Nobody knows why, it just happened and occurs in about 1 in 100,000 births. When I was two years old, the surgeons at the Royal Children's Hospital then transplanted the second toe from each foot onto my hand so that I now have a thumb and little finger so I have a pincer grip. They are called "Tingers", short for toe - fingers. They may look really different, but they are pretty awesome as I can now hold things like pens, lids and food. This means that I can do everything that a 4yr old does, however, sometimes I may do it differently, or it may take me a little longer to figure out the best way to do it.

My hand looks a little different, and it is just like anything else that makes you unique such as having glasses or freckles. I do not mind people asking me questions about them so please ask if you like. I love biking, scooting, playing the playground (particularly climbing and sliding down the fireman's pole), drawing, reading and playing with my older sister Rebecca who will start Grade 1 next year too. I look forward to meeting you in the New Year and playing with you in the playground!

Jessica

Other ideas for introduction letters can be found online. On the website **Born Just Right** there is a letter by Jordan's Mum which offers a different approach. Rather than talk about the child and what they like to do, it focuses on advising parents how to respond to their child's questions. (reference 3).

Are children's books about difference a good way to introduce the topic of hand difference to the class?

Reading books to the class can provide a great way to engage children about difference. Some books specially focus on hand difference, while others on difference more generally.

These books can also be an excellent way to prepare your child for kinder and school. Many parents have said reading the books at home was very supportive for their child. This includes situations where they have found the questions of other children difficult to manage. The books have supported them to not feel so alone in their experience.

Which books are best?

Here are some books that address hand difference:

Some books are difficult to find in Australia, or to buy online. We recommend that you check out what books might be on offer from your local library or from Amazon and eBay. If you are struggling to find them, contact Aussie Hands for help.



Little Miss Jessica Goes to School, by Australian author Jessica Smith.

Born without a left hand, Jessica's story reinforces to kids that being different is okay. The book can be purchased directly from Jessica's website (reference 4).



Different is Awesome by Ryan Haack. An American, Ryan was born without his left forearm. He has a great

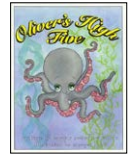
website from which the book can be purchased (reference 5).

Here are some books that address difference in a more general way:

It's okay to be different by Todd Parr (2009). The book teaches about diversity and tolerance. The storylines include a kangaroo with a dog in her pouch. The storylines can be the starting point to ask children if they know anyone like the characters in the book or if they see a character resembling themselves.



Oliver's High Five by Beverley Brown (1998). This is a story about an octopus with five legs who goes in search of work about the sea. Read about Oliver's



adventures above the sea, and how, through his determination and positive attitude, he corrects the misconceptions other people have about physical challenges.

Are there any cartoons or films the class can watch which talk about difference?

Yes, for example *Maya and Miguel – when Maya met Andy*. This is a lovely cartoon about a new boy Andy who moves into the neighbourhood. Maya doesn't know if he will be able to do sport activities and so tries to help by getting the gang to do everything but sport together. But as it turns out Andy can do all the things that the others in the gang can too! (reference 6).

And there is the movie *Finding Nemo* (2013) about the adventures of a fish who happens to have one fin shorter than the other. If you've seen *Finding Nemo* then you know all about Nemo's "lucky fin" and how being made a little differently doesn't stop him from accomplishing anything he sets out to do.

Will my child's hand difference make them a target of bullies?

Bullying is an issue that many children face, including those both with and without a hand difference. But understandably, parents of children with a hand difference are concerned that this will make their child a target of bullies.

How can I tell if my child is being bullied?

Keep an eye out for the signs. Children can often feel embarrassed or too self-conscious to disclose being bullied, so parents are advised to watch out for key signs. These include a reluctance to go to school and complaints of physical ailments including stomach ache and headaches. There is lots of good information about the types of bullying and how to spot the warning signs in children online (references 7, 8 and 9).

What can I do if my child is being bullied?

Bullying can be devastating for children's confidence and self-esteem. They need lots of love and support, both at home and wherever the bullying is happening. They also need to know that you will take action to prevent any further bullying.

Here are some suggestions:

Talk to your child

Just talking about the bullying can be a huge stress reliever for your child, and importantly, talking also sends the message to them that you are there for them. Admittedly listening to what is hurting or upsetting your child can be difficult as a parent. Giving them the time and space to express their feelings is important. Listen to your child's feelings with a non-judgemental or critical ear, and make sure that your child understands that they are not to blame.

Discuss with your child about how they can respond to bullying

Practice with your child how they could respond to the hurtful comments or actions. Consider different scenarios, which include role plays. Encourage responses which do not inflame the situation but rather deflect the intensity.

Some parents find that having some fun can help your child to relieve the tension and give your child a feeling of regaining control. Humour can be used as a way for your child to be more assertive. For example responding to a bully with "you have been watching far too much TV!"

Build your child's confidence and self-esteem

A good way to do this is to encourage your child to pursue interests in a different environment from where the bullying is taking place, such as a sports club or community group. Help them to find places where they feel accepted and liked. Support them find activities that they can develop proficiency and enjoyment in.

Discuss the bullying with your child's school

Let your child know that the school is there to help and support them. Ask the school about their bullying policy and how they plan to manage the situation with your child. Keep in touch with the school and ensure that they follow through.

"...There has been some form of name calling which has really upset Tegan but I have always spoken to the teachers about what is going on for her and they have been brilliant at following up with the kids involved. I find if it is spoken about quickly it doesn't progress further...Take comfort that they will look after your child. If you feel this is lacking speak up loudly."

– An Aussie Hands parent

References

- 1) www.aussiehands.org
- 2) Jordan's book to read to the class: www.scribd.com/doc/61372746/Jordan-Kindergarten-Book
- 3) www.bornjustright.com/2011/08/talking-to-kindergarten/
- 4) www.little-miss-jessica.myshopify.com/products/little-miss-jessica-goes-to-school
- 5) www.livingonehanded.com/about/
- 6) www.youtube.com/watch?v=QISIKWZ1k70
- 7) www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/bullystoppers/Pages/what.aspx
- 8) www.bullyingnoway.gov.au
- 9) www.raisingchildren.net.au/articles/bullying_helping_your_child.html

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Connect with us

We welcome your involvement

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