



Aussie Hands

Supporting Australians who
have a hand difference

Kindergarten and School Starter Resource Kit For Teachers



www.aussiehands.org



Aussie F

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. For many, teaching a child with a hand difference is a new experience.

This kit contains some of the most frequently asked questions, as well as practical advice for teachers.

What causes hand abnormalities and how common are they?

A congenital hand anomaly develops early in a pregnancy and is evident at birth. Common anomalies include having less than five fingers, fingers that are joined or bones that are too short.

Hand differences can be caused by hereditary conditions and also "amniotic banding", when bands in the amniotic fluid wrap around the baby's fingers in the womb. This causes a loss of blood flow to the hand, meaning it can't develop properly. However, in most cases the cause is unknown. The hand anomaly is not due to something the mother did or did not do during pregnancy.

While birth records don't document hand deformities, congenital hand anomalies are rare. It's worth remembering too that some children might have lost fingers due to an accident or an illness such as cancer.

What words should I use when talking about a child with a hand abnormality?

Avoid using words like "abnormality" or "deformity", as these have negative connotations. "Hand difference" is the most common and accepted phrase.

Ask the parent or the child what words they use – for example, they might prefer words like "little hand". If there is a word or phrase used by the family, take this as your cue when speaking to the child and their peers.

"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

How can I best support a child with a hand difference and their parents?

Parents of a child with a hand difference will often feel anxious about their child starting kindergarten or school. Will their child fit into the school environment and will they be a target of bullying because of their hand difference?

Your support and involvement will comfort and reassure parents as their child makes the successful transition to kindergarten and school.

Consider initiating a meeting with the parent and child before the kindergarten/school year starts and use it as an opportunity to discuss any questions or concerns that they might have.

Keep communication open. Touch base with parents promptly as issues arise. Invite the parents to come to you if anything crops up throughout the year that concerns them or their child.

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

– An Aussie Hands parent



Are there any specific things that a child with a hand difference will need support to do?

Children with hand differences are very capable and able to do all the things that other children do. They might do some tasks differently, but they can master them all the same. Sometimes it can take them longer to do certain tasks.

As with all children, a good approach is to encourage them to do things independently and support the development of their skills. Only step in to provide practical assistance if other options have failed.

Before the year commences, ask the parent if there are specific tasks they foresee that their child will need support with. This might be tying shoelaces. Also ask if they use any aids and when and how these work.

"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 principal that she can wear Velcro shoes (not shoelace ones like everyone else)".

– An Aussie Hands parent



Should I talk to the child's class about the topic of hand difference?

This is a decision best made in collaboration with the child's parents. How each child feels about their hand difference at that specific time should be considered.

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

How can the topic of hand difference can be introduced to the class?

There are a range of options. Among the most popular is getting an adult to talk to the class about hand difference. This could be a parent, the teacher or another adult living with a hand difference. (Contact Aussie Hands to see if a member is available to do this).

The student can also talk to the class, if they feel comfortable. This approach suits children who are confident and don't mind being the centre of attention or being bombarded with questions.

Additional resources that can be included in class are reading books and watching YouTube videos of Aussie Hands members (reference 1).

Another approach is to focus more generally on diversity and difference. This tactic puts hand difference on the agenda in a non-confrontational way and would suit shy or self-conscious children.

To do this you could get the class to discuss "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.



Are there children's books I can use 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.



Which books are best?

Here are some books that address hand difference:

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 2).

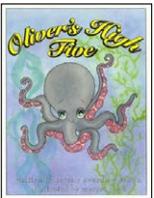


Different is Awesome by Ryan Haack. An American, Ryan was born without his left forearm. He has a great website from which the book can be purchased (reference 3).

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 (reference 4).



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.

Some books are difficult to find in Australia, or to buy online. If you are struggling to find them, contact Aussie Hands for help.

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

Yes. A good example is *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 (reference 5).



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.



References

- 1) www.youtube.com/channel/UC-BIzRFok3HROEmvhGTa56g
- 2) www.little-miss-jessica.myshopify.com/products/little-miss-jessica-goes-to-school
- 3) www.livingonehanded.com/about/
- 4) www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/okay-different-teaching-diversity-890.html?tab=4
- 5) www.youtube.com/watch?v=QISIKWZ1k70

Can I get more information and support from Aussie Hands?

Yes! Aussie Hands supports children with hand differences and their families and teachers all around Australia. We provide information, organise events and host a support group on Facebook: www.facebook.com/groups/4862914717/

There is a range of information, articles and links on the Aussie Hands website www.aussiehands.org. If you can't find the answer to what you are looking for, you are welcome to contact Aussie Hands at info@aussiehands.org.

Thank-You

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Connect with us

We welcome your involvement

Web: www.aussiehands.org

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