

When to Help Your Child and When to Let Go

by Rick Bowers

If you have a child with a limb difference, one of the questions you must ask yourself is, “How much should I help my child?”

Different parents answer in different ways. Some cater to their child’s every need and protect him or her from the outside world in every way. Others step back and let their child learn to do things for himself or herself.

Many people with limb differences go on to live happy and successful lives. They become doctors, prosthetists, truck drivers, lawyers, judges, athletes, police officers, firefighters, nurses, soldiers – you name it. And seemingly without exception, the ones who learn to do things for themselves are the most successful.

Life-Changing Moments

Many of them, like John Foppe, who was born without arms, can point to the time in their life when their parents “saw the light.”

When Foppe was a child, he was dependent on others until he was in the fifth grade. That’s when his mother, Carole, decided to get her son over his dependence on others. She told his brothers not to help him anymore. They weren’t to help him dress, get items from the cupboard, or do anything else.

Foppe recalls lying on the floor sweating, crying and struggling to put his pants on alone without arms. He calls it the turning point in his life. By the time he reached high school, he was amazingly adept at using his feet for hands.

Now in his 30s, Foppe has a Master’s Degree in Social Work and is an author

and motivational speaker. He drives, paints watercolors, types, cooks, and even eats bratwurst and big, greasy cheeseburgers – all with his toes.

Foppe attributes much of his current success to his family’s tough love. “At first, I hated it,” he says. “I didn’t understand how they could be so mean.” But now, he says, “I’m eternally grateful.”



Exceeding Expectations

Expect as much from a child with an amputation as you would from any other child, advises Mary Williams Clark, MD. “Give them chores to do,” she says. “Work hard if you have to with their teachers so that they’re not given high grades ‘because he tries so hard’ or regarded as ‘the poor thing - it’s hard for her.’ People who do that do them no real favor.”

Children with limb differences seem to do better when parents only give assistance when necessary and don’t put limitations on them. When parents expect great things from them and let them learn to do things for themselves, they are often surprised at how much their children can do.

Becoming Miss Iowa

Theresa Uchtyl (pronounced you-ka-til), who was born without a left hand, is a perfect example.

“As Theresa grew,” says her mother, Liz Uchtyl, “she was always doing things for herself. I worried that she would not be able to crawl because you need two hands and I was sure she was going to fall on her face. But, she taught herself how to crawl.” Uchtyl also surprised her mother when she became a baton twirler at age 6 and when she later learned how to type with speed and accuracy.

It was probably even a greater surprise when Uchtyl grew up to become Miss Iowa in the 2000 Miss America Pageant, a world champion baton twirler, and a program manager at Gateway Computers.

“I am one of five girls,” she explains. “My parents claim that the reason that I turned out ‘so good’ was that they never had the time, or energy for that matter, to treat me any differently than the other girls.”





Rudy Garcia-Tolson (Photo courtesy of Challenged Athletes Foundation)

Helping Children Help Themselves

Pryor Baird, an MD in Psychiatry who was born without a left arm below the elbow, supports such a view. “Within reason and with appropriate accommodation, being treated like other children is probably best for amputee children,” he says.

Still, there are many ways parents can effectively help their children, Baird explains. “Just like with other children,” he says, “parents can help by showing as much love as they can, by helping the child find and develop areas of interest and strength, and by helping the child adapt to ‘a world of nonamputees.’”

He explains how his father helped him help himself rather than do everything for him. “When I was 6,” he explains, “my dad, who was an engineer, did not cut my fingernails but instead designed a one-handed nail-clipping device for me. Later, when I was a medical student at the University of Virginia, my dad designed a device that allowed me to ‘percuss’ (tap on) a patient’s abdomen or thorax – a task that normally requires two hands.”

What About Sports?

Parents might be tempted to think, “Well, yes, my child can study just like anyone else and excel in school, but he or she can’t do “rough stuff” like sports.

Consider Rudy Garcia-Tolson.

Garcia-Tolson was born with several rare congenital birth defects. When he was 5, the doctors gave him and his parents a choice: Keep his legs and stay in a wheelchair or walk with the help of prostheses.

He chose to not only walk, but to swim and run as well. Soon after recovering from bilateral knee disarticulations, he began swimming, earning 43 ribbons and 14 medals in two years. When he decided to take up running, he entered competition with athletes of all abilities with the use of prosthetic feet. At the age of 10, he was the youngest bilateral amputee to complete a triathlon.

In 2003, he was selected as one of *People* magazine’s 20 teens who will change the world. Now just 15, he’s competed in several triathlons. He’s carried the torch for the 2002 Olympic Winter Games. And he’s broken numerous records on the track and in the water, including the world record for the men’s 200-meter Individual Medley swimming event at the 2004 Athens Paralympic Games where he also won a gold medal.

Let Them Reach for Anything

Paddy Rossbach, president and CEO of the ACA, notes that parents are pleasantly surprised when their children or teens with limb differences return from events they have attended alone, such as the ACA’s youth events, because, almost without exception, they notice a big change in their children; they have matured, become more independent, and suddenly realize that not only are they not alone, but they are capable of and able to do much more than they thought. Because of this, Rossbach encourages parents to encourage their children to reach for anything even if it seems impossible. “They will never know unless they try,” she says.

“People with disabilities need to be stronger

and more confident than those without if they are to compete with their able-bodied peers,” Rossbach says. “This is why I stress the importance of ‘letting go’ of one’s child with a disability as quickly as possible. By letting go, I mean let them be independent, deal with situations and do things for themselves. This will give them a sense of achievement, boost their self-confidence, and prepare them for some of the situations they will inevitably face in life. Probably the best advice is to treat this child the same way you would treat your other children. Parents who try to do everything for their children are sending the message that they are not able to do things for themselves.”

She offers the example of one of the ski camps she ran. “It included four 6-year-olds away for five days for the first time without their parents,” she says. “Not only did they all learn to ski, but they learned to put on their own prostheses! They returned home full of things they could do.”

It is also very important, she says, for parents of children with limb differences to learn from other parents who have faced the same situation. Support groups, she notes, are excellent for people to meet and discuss issues of common interest in a relaxed atmosphere. Hearing how other parents have learned to cope and let their children “fly” will enable them to open the door to a brighter future of independence for their child.

Jim Abbott, a famous one-handed major-league baseball pitcher, once said that he will always be thankful that his parents never allowed him to use his lack of a hand as an excuse. Yours will probably be thankful too. ❖