

# Building a Positive Body Image

by Bonnie St. John

When I was 13, growing up in San Diego, California, one of my worst fears as a young woman with a limb difference was being invited to a beach party. I hated trying to walk in the sand with my lower-limb prosthesis because I always stumbled. I also worried about ruining my prosthetic leg with salt water and sand. But, most of all, I dreaded the moment I would have to strip down to my swimsuit.

Right where other girls' bikinis would hit their cute hips, my prosthesis met with my thigh and caused an awkward bulge of flesh at the edge of my artificial leg. Walking around and playing with the other kids in swimsuits was not fun for me.

From that first humiliation, things would only get worse. Before getting in the water, I would have to remove my prosthetic leg and let everyone see my residual limb, which I felt looked like a turkey leg with scars all over it. Next, I would have to hop after everyone as they headed for the water.

Instead of skipping through the shallow water and jumping up and down as the waves came up to my chest like the others, I would be knocked down by even the smallest swell. All I could do was sit on the sand in the shallows and watch my friends or swim in the deep water. Playing in the surf never really worked for me. I felt so pathetic sitting there getting sand in my swimsuit bottom.

Like me, other young people with limb differences face many such awkward moments, whether they are swimming in physical education class, dancing, dating or participating in some other activity. As a parent, you've probably wondered how you can help your child or teen-ager build a positive body image in the face of so many situations that can cause embarrassment and humiliation.

My mother took the approach of trying to make my appearance as "normal" as possible. She bought me clothes that disguised my prosthesis. She bought a bicycle for me that was lighter and more expensive than my brother's or sister's bike. She fought those who wanted to put me in a special school for "disabled" kids, which was common 35 years ago before mainstreaming became standard policy.

"Don't hop!" she routinely admonished me. "Put your leg on!" I wasn't allowed to crawl, hop or use crutches around the house when I didn't feel like putting my leg on. She wanted more than anything for me to fit in and look like other kids.

It wasn't until I was invited to go skiing one year that everything changed. To ski, I had to face up to being an amputee. Looking for the special equipment I needed – outriggers – led me to an amputee support group in San Diego, Amputees In Motion. The president of the



group, Jerry Dahlquist, lent me his own outriggers for my first trip. Once on the slopes, I had to remove my leg and suffer the constant stares of all of the other skiers.

Yet, I wasn't alone. With other amputees in my group, I could laugh instead of cry.

"Do you see that girl over there with two legs?" my friend Cathy said loudly as she pointed rudely. "Do you think she was born that way?" We laughed at them for a change. I learned to enjoy being different. I learned to be an athlete, work out, and value my body.

Now, I have a sports leg with all of the joints and hydraulics showing – something that would have given my mother a heart attack when I was a kid. I walk around and smile at people who stare. I feel good about my body – all of it.

What lessons can you take from my experience to help your children or teen-agers?

**Tip #1: Help them to be comfortable by allowing their differences to show.**

I am glad that my mother pushed me to walk well and to be able to fit in, but it is just as important to be comfortable with how different your body is. Although I appreciate my mother's help, too much covering up sends the message that there is something wrong with your body and that you should be ashamed of it. It should be OK for those with a limb difference to wear their arm

or leg or not to wear it. If they are really comfortable with themselves, others will be comfortable too. In fact, I find that many people are drawn to me because of my leg and my attitude. They want the kind of strength and self-confidence I have.

What helped me the most was spending time with other active, confident amputees who were my age or a little older. If you don't live in a big city, it can be difficult to find such a peer group. My ski buddies were all in Los Angeles. You can connect your amputee child or teen to others through the Amputee Coalition of America's national resources. (For more information, visit the ACA Web site at [www.amputee-coalition.org](http://www.amputee-coalition.org) or call toll-free 888/267-5669.)

**Tip #2: Empower them with information and the opportunity to improve their body.**

"Amputee teens have many of the same issues as any teen," says Heather Dominick, a certified educator and nutrition counselor ([www.individual-health.net](http://www.individual-health.net)), who leads a teen holistic health group that focuses on nutrition and health. "They worry about their weight, acne, and whether others will like them. Helping them to understand what whole, natural foods and forms of exercise work best for their own individual body so that they look and feel healthy makes a large impact in helping teens feel good about their bodies."

You can empower your children or teens by giving them access to resources they may need to improve their look, such as a nutritionist, a dermatologist, a hair stylist, or a personal trainer. While you may not be able to provide all of these things all of the time, even one or two sessions with various experts can teach them what they need to know to enhance their body image on their own.

Looking attractive in general can make more difference in their life than having a missing limb.

**Tip #3: Encourage them to take up a physical activity they enjoy.**

For me, sports made a big difference in my body confidence. Before I started skiing, I felt inadequate in my body. I would often sit and read a book while other kids jumped rope on the playground. When I did participate, whether it was aerobics, soccer or yoga, I felt a lot of stress from trying to keep up and not look stupid. Disabled sports allowed me to compete on an equal playing field and gave me the opportunity to work hard and be the best. It helped me to understand that God didn't make junk when he made me. I could be a champion in my own way, on my own terms.

Not all young people want to become sports champions. Still, every bit of skill they develop – whether it's in dancing, gymnastics, golfing or cycling – will give them more confidence in the value of their body, its abilities, and its attractiveness.

Your instinct may be to protect your child from sports or dance because of his or her disability. My feeling, however, is that having a disability means we constantly must compensate with the rest of our body. To function, we must be stronger than "normies." Living with a disability, in fact, means that strength training and physical workouts are even more important than ever.

Just follow these tips, and watch how your child's body image changes. You might be amazed. ❖

*Bonnie St. John is an Olympic ski champion, a Harvard and Oxford honors graduate, a Rhodes Scholar, an inspirational writer and speaker, and the mother of an 8-year-old daughter, Darcy. Bonnie was born with proximal femoral focal deficiency (PFFD), a rare congenital condition that led to amputation at age 5. Today, she is an author, motivational speaker, and executive/life coach. You may join Bonnie's Circle of Friends at [www.bonniestjohn.com/circle](http://www.bonniestjohn.com/circle)*

