Preparing children for school can be both exciting and nerve-wracking. New friends, new environments and new activities await. Children may be apprehensive about the impending changes. Preparing a child with limb differences for school can be even more of a challenge. However, experts and fellow parents have plenty of good advice to help make the transition a smooth one.

In the booklet, *Children With Limb Loss: A Handbook for Teachers*, the Area Child Amputee Center of Grand Rapids, Michigan, offers advice to teachers. Tips include:

- Answer questions by allowing children to do a show-and-tell about their limbs and prostheses; during this session, encourage each child to describe something different about themselves.
- Focus on children’s abilities rather than disabilities; as classmates and friends see children with limb differences function normally in a number of activities, concerns about differences in appearance will diminish.
- Don’t limit the activities or involvement in school of children with limb differences; encourage them to try new things that help with their development.
- Have the same expectations regarding behavior and discipline of children with limb differences as other children, and treat no child differently than another.
- Draw on resources from local healthcare facilities (or from the Amputee Coalition); many videos, books and online resources are available to help children understand limb differences.

As children reach adolescence, other issues, including social interactions, driving, vocational training and more will arise. Consult area healthcare facilities for available programs and resources.
First Day and Before
It’s recommended that parents meet with teachers and administrators to discuss their children’s limb difference and any accommodations that may be necessary before school starts.

Alisa Marcal, whose 8-year-old son Eric was born without a left hand, says that parents of children with limb difference should inform school officials if their children need assistance with tasks.

“Explain what your child can do on their own and what they need assistance with,” says Marcal, who is also president of the Unlimbited Possibilities support group on Long Island. “Any services the school needs to provide should be in place before the child starts.”

Patti Garofalo also suggests contacting school officials before school starts. She started the Helping Hands Foundation on the West Coast when her daughter Annie (now 17) was born without a left hand. Garofalo is now president of the organization’s East Coast version.

“Advise the school and the teacher what your normal practice is for explaining and discussing the limb loss – educate them in advance of the first day,” explains Garofalo. “Then we let the kids ask the questions and have Annie answer as many as she can.”

Marcal also strongly advocates that parents work with their children to create an “All About Me” book to present on their first day of class – a practice Garofalo says many Helping Hands families also use.

The book introduces the child to the class. It can be elaborate or simple. Marcal and Eric used a loose-leaf binder, construction paper, scissors, markers, glitter and glue. The first page says, ‘Hi,
my name is Eric,” with a picture, but the limb difference isn’t shown. Subsequent pages reveal the limb difference and demonstrate that it doesn’t impair the child’s abilities.

“The next pages show everything he can do: ‘I can go swimming; I can read a book; I can go horseback riding,’ and all his different activities,” says Marcal. “Then there are pictures of him with his friends and the last page is, ‘Let’s all be friends.’”

“That seems to break the ice and give permission to the teachers and to the kids to ask questions,” adds Garofalo. “It gives the opportunity to explain, ‘This is how she was born; it’s no big deal, so you don’t have to wonder or worry.’”

to be involved with her at the school. The Child Life person came in and talked about how everyone had differences, which was really good.”

The Q-and-A sessions showed Candace’s schoolmates that everyone had differences (and similarities). “The kids had a lot of great questions,” Darden says. “It made them feel like, ‘OK, she’s like me because I have this issue going on,’ because some of them had juvenile diabetes or they couldn’t play because they had bad cases of asthma. All these things came up. It really helped the situation greatly.”

Darden says Candace knows her life is better now than it would have been without the cancer and her amputation. She has been introduced to many opportunities, such as participating in skiing, horseback riding and other sports. In school, things are arranged for her betterment, so that she can meet all expectations. She wants to become either a prosthetist or an oncologist.

Garofalo says that, as the classes get older, the questions change, bringing up social issues – for example, how limb difference affects one’s social standing. Her daughter does presentations to dispel misconceptions about limb difference in this regard.

Later Years
Diann Darden, whose daughter Candace, a 12-year survivor of osteosarcoma from the age of 4, returned to elementary school after revision surgery on her right leg, says holding question-and-answer sessions with schoolchildren helped stop the teasing that Candace was enduring.

“Candace was already there, and some kids started teasing because she wore hearing aids and a prosthesis and went to school some days with her walker or her crutches,” explains Darden. “Child Life Development at the hospital helped introduce Candace back at school. They gave us books that helped us, and they had books for all the different people who were going

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