

# “mummy, why is he different?”

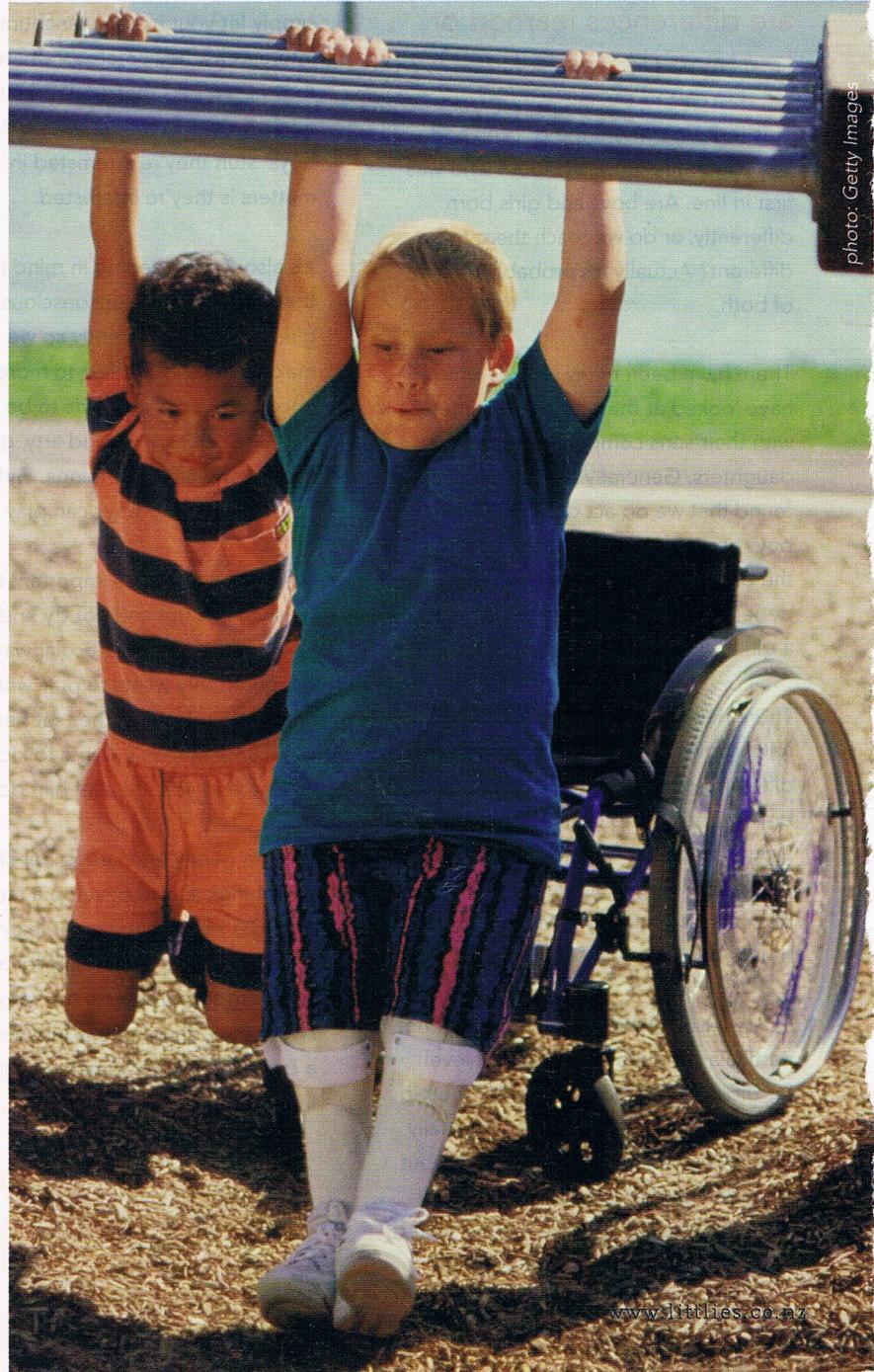
Picture this. You're at the supermarket and your child suddenly points out a person who looks a little different, then loudly proclaims that difference to the world. You cringe in embarrassment. Oh my, now what do you do? Ignore it and quickly shoo your child in the other direction?

Absolutely not, according to Mums of special needs children! In fact, they welcome little ones being so forthright and say parents should use it as an opportunity to teach children about differences between people.

In some countries there are social penalties imposed on parents for having a child with a disability - fortunately our attitudes in New Zealand are much more accepting.

Littlies approached some Mums of children with special needs for suggestions of how parents should best react when their kids point out obvious differences in others.

They generally agreed that the best plan is to acknowledge the difference and, in the next breath, find and point out a similarity. Encourage your child to ask questions, and if you can include the person they noticed in the dialogue too, do so, as your efforts will almost always be appreciated (and defuse any embarrassment).



## "Why is that boy in a wheelchair?"

Although most people move aside when they need to, the world tends to ignore people in wheelchairs and they unfortunately often speak to the person pushing the wheelchair rather than the person sitting in it. A preschooler, however, is often at similar eye-height so when your child points out someone in a wheelchair, encourage them to acknowledge the person sitting and say, "Hello".

A simple explanation of the whys of the wheelchair will suffice ("His legs don't work like ours work so his Mum pushes him in the wheelchair"), and in the next breath ensure you mention a similarity ("Look he's got a balloon. He loves balloons like you do!").

Being in a wheelchair is physically isolating because the world happens up high. Like a baby in a pushchair, there isn't a great deal of opportunity for a child in a wheelchair to touch or see people at the same level as they are. So bend down, look them in the eye and shake or hold their hand. This will be a great role model for your child too.

## "Mum why does she look different than me?"

A preschooler won't deliberately search for differences, and they are generally unaware of any sort of disability. Again provide an acknowledgement of whatever is different and immediately follow up with an upbeat reinforcement

of something similar ("Yes, but his T-shirt tells me he loves cars just like you!"). You don't need to go into specifics, but if an older child needs more information, get a book out at the library, check the internet or even try asking the person your child has noticed.

Pat has a son, Stuart, with Down's Syndrome and says living in a community where the local residents know him has been great because he is treated the same way as everyone else. She's quick to point out that underestimating Stuart annoys him enormously because he is quite capable of participating in most activities – he simply needs a bit more help learning what to do and may not do them as quickly as others. It's better to over-estimate someone's comprehension and abilities rather than under-estimate them.

## "Why is that boy yelling out strange things?"

"It really upsets my daughter to think children are scared of her. Reassure your child not to be frightened – she's special and her brain works differently." Deb's daughter, Sal, looks normal but is prone to outbursts. As there is no obvious disability, Deb has received many negative comments from people who've leapt to (wrongful) conclusions about her parenting. She is appreciative of those who make an effort to talk to Sal directly or who offer to help her if she is struggling with Sal during one of her outbursts.

For these children, their behavioural differences become more evident in

adulthood. When you see an older child acting out in public, be understanding and supportive of the caregiver working hard to enforce the boundaries – sometimes a tantrum in an older child requires the same consideration as a two-year-old's! An encouraging smile, parent-to-parent, can really help.

When your child notices someone behaving differently, take your cue from the caregiver. Ask, "Is he ok?" or "Can I help?", rather than the more negative, "What's wrong with him?" Paying a compliment directly to the person can sometimes turn a difficult situation around ("That's a neat toy you've got there").

Robyn has a daughter who is severely autistic. She believes any connection is positive and loves it when children take an interest in Waimarie. She explains to them that Waimarie is just a baby in a big girl's body so they can better understand why she is able to do things that for them would be considered naughty.

So the next time your child points out and comments on someone who looks to be different, rather than duck your head in shame, acknowledge your child's curiosity and answer his questions honestly and matter-of-factly. And for every difference your child notes, be sure to look out for similarities too – because underneath we're a lot more the same than we are different! 

*Liz Donnelly is a contributing writer and Mum of one.*

For information about and for people with disabilities, contact CCS Information Service. Freephone 0800 227200 or visit [www.ccs.org.nz](http://www.ccs.org.nz)