

MAGIC NZ

Supporting Children with Growth Disorders
and their Families



www.magicnz.org.nz

Psychosocial Issues of Growth Delayed Children

Introduction

People tend to judge others by their appearance, what they wear, how they speak and what they know. Part of the judgment about "appearance" or "looks" is the assessment of height. We seem to judge age by height. People say, "He looks like a five year old" or "She seems to be about ten years old." Having made this decision, people proceed to act toward the other person as though they are actually as old as they appear, particularly if it is a child. For most normal-statured children this poses no problem. But for short children who are growth delayed, it can make life difficult.

It causes two sets of problems. It suggests to the child that he/she is younger than they are and allows for immature behavior. Secondly, it interferes with social maturation in the child because he/she will tend to behave in a fashion consistent with what adults seem to expect. Therefore, many short growth-delayed children have trouble "acting their age." For a long time, this tendency to be immature was thought to be the major psychological difficulty facing short children, but recent studies have shown there may be others.

School and the Short Child

In the U.S. approximately 4 to 5% of school-age children show significant degrees of underachievement academically each year. Recent studies done in the National Cooperative Growth Study (NCGS), supported by Genentech, Inc., show that short children entering growth hormone therapy have a much higher rate of learning and social problems than their peers. About 18 to 20% have a learning skill deficit in arithmetic, spelling or reading. Another group has problems in social interactions and show behavioral problems such as shyness, withdrawal or attention deficits. These problems appear in children with different growth diagnoses, and, therefore, cannot be due entirely to the social effects of being short. Parents should carefully consider how they approach managing these potential difficulties.

What Parents Can Do

There are several ways parents and caregivers can help short children cope with potential problems.

Build Self-Esteem

Building your child's self-esteem is very important. Developing a strong positive self-image is a huge advantage for every child and particularly helpful to the short child. Use every opportunity to praise and encourage your child. Do not criticize or be negative.

Find your child's strengths and build on them. For example, short children may feel they cannot be involved in sports - *this is incorrect*. There are many non-contact sports to become involved with, such as tennis, athletics, cricket, soccer and swimming. If your child has a sense of humour, develop it, praise it and comment positively about it. If your child is creative - a writer, poet or musician - spend time supporting and enlarging these gifts. If your child is especially compassionate towards others, notice, report what you see and admire the quality. Building positive self-esteem will help combat negative effects brought about because of feeling different from others.

Teaching your child to be optimistic is one of the most valuable skills that you can impart – one that will build true self-esteem. Optimism allows children to be resilient, resist feeling helpless and learn how to overcome obstacles.

Seek Professional Help if Needed

Talk to your child about their feelings. Monitor their behaviour. If you feel they are not coping, experiencing bullying or having behavioural problems, seek help. Ask your paediatric endocrinologist or paediatrician to recommend someone to carry out psychological testing on your child. This is essential in order to discover if there are problems in intelligence, academic achievement, learning disability, attention deficit disorders or behaviour problems. A skilled child psychologist can evaluate for these types of problems and offer possible solutions. Also being in close touch with your child's school regarding academic progress or signs of social or behavior problems usually helps "head off" problems before they get out of hand.

Many parents find talking to a child psychologist BEFORE they notice any problems can be very helpful and reassuring. A psychologist can advise on how to improve your child's self-esteem and tell you the warning signs that will alert you to any problems.

Consider School Placement

Treating your child according to age, not size, is important; however, if your child's birthday is near the cutoff for class placement, consider allowing your child to be one of the older ones in his/her year rather than one of the younger ones. Your child may gain extra confidence by being one of the slightly, though not significantly, older children in his/her class. A child's success at school depends on their social and physical maturity as well as academic performance. You know your child and have a good idea where they fit in socially, physically and academically (consider the early years as well as how they'll fare in intermediate and secondary school). Don't be afraid to discuss your concerns with the school administrators and find the right place for your child.

Manage Treatment Expectations

Finally, be sure you and your child fully understand what is to be expected from treatment and/or therapy. For example, some studies suggest that children and parents have unrealistic expectations about the changes in height that growth hormone therapy might bring. They expect too much, believing that treatment will make large differences in height immediately. This is not the case and can lead to some disappointments if these misconceptions are not quickly cleared up. Ask your pediatric endocrinologist or nurse about the treatment at each visit, make up a list of issues and be sure your child also has an opportunity to talk and ask questions.

How Do Growth Delayed Children Fare Later In Life?

There are many conflicting studies on the outcomes for short-statured individuals. Some indicate no disadvantage due to short stature in childhood; however, some reports on these young people indicate they do not perform well academically, live at home with parents for extended periods of time and/or may be unhappy in their social and work lives.

These problems are not seen in the majority of cases, and most short-statured individuals grow-up to be healthy, well-adjusted adults. However, the issues do occur frequently enough to warrant concern by physicians, nurses and parents. It is clear that in order to better develop a successful adult life, children with growth delay should receive appropriate psychological and educational monitoring and support as early as possible. The proper combination of support, counseling and medical treatment will help produce a better, all-around outcome for your child.

Useful Resources

There are many useful resources about raising psychologically healthy children available for parents on the internet and through the public library or bookshops. These are usually not aimed specifically at parents of short children, but the advice will generally apply.

Advocate for Your Child

Most importantly, be your child's #1 advocate and trust your parental gut instinct. The appropriate care under the proper specialists will greatly improve your child's outcome.

Ask Questions

You will probably have questions that are specific to your child. Leave no questions unanswered, even if you think the questions are simple or silly. Don't be afraid to ask questions or get a second opinion from another specialist. A greater understanding will allow you to provide optimal care for your child.

Network

Coping with the worry of and special attention necessary to care for a growth-delayed child can be overwhelming, especially if you try to face it alone. Day-to-day issues can be less stressful if you are in contact with other families who "have been there". MAGIC NZ can put you in touch with other families with growth-delayed children.

**For more information visit www.magicnz.org.nz, email jan@magicnz.org.nz
or write to MAGIC NZ, PO Box 1493, Wellington.**

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