

# Wellness Education

## Friendships are Important

Think of all the ways you interact with people: in school, at home, when you get together with friends. These friendships are an important part of your life.

There are many positive ways you interact and build friendships. It can happen by:

- Sharing stories with friends and family to feel closer to them
- Telling a joke to your teacher to see her laugh
- Hugging your friends or family
- Holding hands or kissing your boyfriend or girlfriend

Strong friendships enable you to feel connected to people emotionally.

Some people with physical problems can feel embarrassed. They might avoid being part of the group. Or they might avoid friendships, assuming that people will make fun.

That's not a good idea. Why? Because connecting with people can make you happier. Think about it . . . you know a friendship is good for you when you feel better about yourself just knowing that person is part of your life.

Don't let your physical problems prevent you from forming close friendships; or from joining in the fun activities that your classmates are doing.

You use a catheter to help you keep your body healthy. It also allows you the freedom to go out and do what you want. Your friends will understand that.

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### When and how do I tell my friends that I use a catheter?

It's really up to you. Body functions are private, so you may not want to say anything to your friends unless you know them really well. Other kids in your situation may decide to be very open and up front—telling close friends and even not-so-close friends—as a way to explain why they need to schedule regular bathroom visits.

When you tell people, just tell them that your bladder doesn't work the same as other people's. You could say that you need to use a catheter (you can say it's a small hollow tube) that allows you to urinate.

If you feel OK answering questions, that can be helpful for your friends. They probably just want to know a few details to help them better understand how you use a catheter. Think of it as a chance to fill your friends in on a topic you know very well!

If you decide to tell your friends, and to answer their questions, it might help you and your friends feel a little closer.

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### My new friend keeps asking me about going on a sleepover, but what if I leak and urine gets on something?

Your friends ask you because they want to spend time with you. If you don't expect much leaking, try using a pad. You could also talk to your parents about plastic sheeting you can put underneath you when you sleep. It will work whether you're in a bed or in a sleeping bag on the floor. Let your friend know ahead of time, and ask if that's OK. Everyone will probably be fine with it. (Or have your parents call their parents if that's easier for you.)

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### Taking the first step to get to know new kids can seem scary.

Sometimes it is, but it's good to reach out to people in a friendly way. Maybe you're in a wheelchair and your classmates don't know anyone else who depends on a wheelchair. Both kids and adults can be uneasy about approaching anyone who's "different" in any way. They might be afraid they'll say the wrong thing.

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But when they see you for who you really are—someone who's nice and who's fun to be with—friendships can blossom. It's great to take the first step to friendship. You may find that you end up with a lot more friends.

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**A new student asked me why I'm late to class and asked what's wrong with me. I didn't answer because I didn't know what to say to someone I don't know.**

Next time you could just say you have an arrangement with the nurse to be late to certain classes. If you want to, you could tell him that your bladder doesn't work like other people's, and you have permission to take extra time in the bathroom.

You might find that if you're up front with others—telling them honestly about how their body is different—other kids respect your honesty. (They may not say so very often, but it's true!) It also shows that you're not embarrassed by any physical difference.

It's good to show that you feel OK with your body. Most other kids will follow that lead and be OK with it too.

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**But what about people who make fun of me because I use a catheter? And it's always in front of other kids.**

Some people do like to make fun of others, it's just who they are. One thing you can do is show that you're a bigger person—and we mean emotionally, in the way that counts. Maybe just ask the person why they are making fun of someone with a physical difference. That way you're questioning what they're doing, but you're not making fun of them either. Your simple question alone can impress other kids who clearly see what's going on.

If you're with friends, they may come to your defense too, and you don't have to say anything right then. When that happens, focus on how good it feels that your friends stood up for you.

If you feel that someone's comments are very mean-spirited, and especially if the same person bothers you repeatedly, take action. Talk to your teachers, your school counselor, and your mom and dad. Sometimes bullying can be very hurtful, and that's not OK. You know deep down that though your body is different than other kids', you deserve to be treated with respect. A bully often targets more than one student—anyone he or she sees as vulnerable. So you'll also be helping out other classmates when you tell adults about this behavior.

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**I do have one good friend, Paul. But I don't always join in with his friends because I'm not sure I can trust them.**

A good place to start is to talk to your friends you can trust, like Paul. When the time is right, let him know what you're thinking and feeling. He maybe hasn't even thought about what it's like for someone with a physical difference to be around kids you don't know very well.

Ask what he thinks. He might offer to help you by saying something to his friends. Maybe all it takes is his saying you're a good guy. The rest of them may take his cue and see you for your personality instead of for any physical differences you may have.

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The kids at school know me, so I feel OK using the bathroom at school. But I try to avoid using public bathrooms in movie theaters or malls or other places.

It's always important to catheterize on schedule. Don't wait longer than you should just because you'll be away from home. And don't avoid drinking if you're away from home. You need to keep your body healthy, and drinking fluids is critical.

Always remember to wash your hands very well beforehand. If you touch anything after you wash your hands, use antiseptic hand gel. And use an antiseptic towelette to clean your urethral area. It's important to keep things clean no matter which bathroom you are using.

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One friend told me that having to use a catheter seems like such a pain. Some of the time I agree—but I wasn't sure what to say.

It's a good idea to mention to your friends why it's an advantage for you to use a catheter. Point out that by using your catheter only when you need to:

- You're less likely to get infections
- You can go places when you want to; you feel more free in terms of what you do in your life
- It gives you more control over your body

Helping your friends understand the importance of using a catheter will make them more supportive of you. Explaining about your catheter, when asked, can also just make your friends feel closer to you.

I'm thinking of asking a boy out on a date. But I'm in a wheelchair and I'm not sure how I'll react if he says no.



The best thing to do is ask. If he says no, never blame yourself or your body. It's always hard to hear no—but it happens to everyone, without exception.

And look at the bright side: he might say yes. If he does, just enjoy the time you spend together, getting to know him better. If you feel comfortable with yourself, that will help him feel comfortable too.

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I hear that I should feel confident in myself even though I have a physical disability. But I don't feel that way. What can I do?

This is when a counselor or therapist can be really helpful. Talk to your mom and dad about where to get help. Or ask your doctor or nurse. In most cities and towns there are many good counselors to choose from. Or maybe you want to try your school counselor first.

It's never a bad time to ask for help with your feelings about your health or your relationships with friends or family.

In fact, it's a really positive step to ask for help—whenever you need it. By talking to an expert, you may even find that it helps you in other parts of your life too.

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I feel lonely a lot of the time, but it's not something I talk about with anyone. What can I do to feel better?

It's good that you're wondering about ways to feel better, and less lonely. Many people who are shy, or many people with a disability, can idealize others' lives. They think that the more social or more popular kids are very happy and lead near-perfect lives.

The truth is, everyone has problems in life. And at times everyone feels lonely.

It's OK to feel lonely sometimes. It's good to ask yourself when you feel happy and loved. Feeling both of those extremes is pretty normal. One thing to do, when thinking about when you feel happy and loved, is to try to feel that way more often. Do you feel that way when you're with a close group of friends? Your best friend? Your parents or brothers or sisters? Whatever makes you feel loved is something you need to foster. See if there are ways to spend more time with the people who love you, and who make you feel loved.

Remember, though, that others would probably come to find you just as likeable if you give them a chance. Be open to new friends.

And if you feel very lonely, it's a good idea to talk to a therapist or counselor. Mention it to your mom and dad, who will likely want you to get the help you need. Tell the counselor how you feel, and when you feel that way. They can offer some good suggestions to help you.

I never used to give positive feedback to others, even if they did something nice for me. But now I do and it feels good!

It's true that saying kind things to others can, somehow, make you feel better about yourself. Think about ways that people have helped you out:

- Your mom takes time off work to take you to the doctor
- Your teacher makes a comment in class so that the students consider the views and needs of kids with disabilities
- A classmate says something that's insensitive to you, and another classmate speaks up in your defense

Those things are done for your benefit, and that feels good. When you can, say thank you to those people. It can help build even stronger ties between you and your family, your teachers and your friends.

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## Some final comments

Don't let any physical problems shut you off from connecting with others. Remember what makes you happy in life: your close relationships with other people.

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