

**A PARENTS  
GUIDE TO  
THE**



**PSYCHOLOGICAL  
IMPACT OF  
SCOLIOSIS**

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# WHAT IS SCOLIOSIS?

Scoliosis is a lateral (sideways) curvature of the spine. It frequently occurs during the 'growth spurt' usually between the ages of ten and thirteen when the skeletal frame is undergoing rapid development and it can radically change the appearance of the skeletal frame. It is ten times more common in girls than boys.

## SIGNS OF SCOLIOSIS

- ❖ One shoulder may be higher than the other.
- ❖ One shoulder blade may be more prominent
- ❖ Clothes do not 'hang right'. For example: the hem of a skirt may appear uneven and trouser legs may appear to be different lengths.



# PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF SCOLIOSIS

It has long been acknowledged that a progressive, deforming condition such as scoliosis is likely to have a serious impact both physically and psychologically upon the lives of adolescents.

**SELF IMAGE** is an important issue for adolescents and to a large extent will be dependent on how others view them, react to them and respond to them. An adolescent with scoliosis will seek the opinion of the world surrounding them, from friends, family, peers, authority figures, and in particular from you as parents. Adaption to a distortion of ones physical appearance is always difficult, but particularly so for adolescents and there may be a **tendency to 'over focus' on body image.**

Not being able to dress in the same clothes as their peers can have a negative effect on your child's self esteem. To have the same dress code as your peers is vitally important as it gives a sense of belonging.

A child with scoliosis may find that certain styles do not hang right or fit properly. For example a tight top will accentuate a hump on the back.

# DEVELOPING A POSITIVE SELF IMAGE

It is important to emphasise that there are a number of ways to try to get your child to feel good about themselves and project a positive self image. If your child feels good about themselves they are more likely to successfully deal with any teasing or bullying.

- ❖ One way of tackling a problem is always set aside some **time to talk**, and perhaps more importantly listen. If possible, allow your child to initiate the conversation. Help them to feel comfortable and safe at home. Encourage them to discuss any problems. This will all help them cope with things such as name calling.
- ❖ As parents you can help your child socially by having an **'open house'** policy for their friends. Children who are used to staying over at your house are much more likely to carry on visiting whilst your child is recovering from surgery.
- ❖ When your child's friends do visit, it is essential that they are given some privacy. Psychological well being is just as important as physical fitness.

- ❖ Shopping for clothes can become a work of art. It is possible to buy clothes that are still very fashionable, stylish and flattering, but which conceal the disfigurement. It can take time and a great deal of patience on the part of parents, as shopping with peers may be too traumatic. The boost in self-esteem when your child can look as 'attractive' as their peers is great.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF TREATMENT

Coping with treatment is, not surprisingly, another major issue for children and their parents. It puts additional coping pressures on your child. They will be showing signs of independence at this stage in their life and body privacy becomes important; yet scoliosis is subject to invasive attention from parents and medical staff. Parents need to be aware that the 'control and 'independence' their child may crave is to a certain extent removed. This can cause a lot of anger and frustration.

Another major issue with scoliosis is the uncertainty of treatment. One can never be certain how effective the treatment is going to be, or when it is going to be necessary to perform a particular treatment. Surgical intervention involves prolonged absence from school, frequently when exams are looming. The stress of awaiting major surgery with

the existent risk of damage to the spinal cord and significant pain can also cause considerable distress.

So uncertainty, repeated intervention, discomfort and pain a;; create anxiety. Anxiety can be infectious. If older people are worried this can easily transmit to the child. It is very easy for this to develop into a vicious circle as your child picks upon your anxiety and you pick up on theirs.

Anger and frustration are common feelings. Anger and frustration can be seen as normal responses to treatment and your child can be helped to put them to one side. Anger needs to be channelled.

There are a number of ways parents can help.

- ❖ **You should make sure that all medical decisions are made with the full cooperation of your child.** It is quite easy at this difficult time for your child to refuse treatment such as surgery. This is generally born out of fear so it is easier to say 'no'.
  
- ❖ A way to ease fear is to give them as much information as possible. This might involve further meetings with the surgeon and meetings with other adolescents who have gone through the same procedures

# EFFECT ON PARENTS

Scoliosis does not just affect the child with the condition. It affects the whole family in different ways.

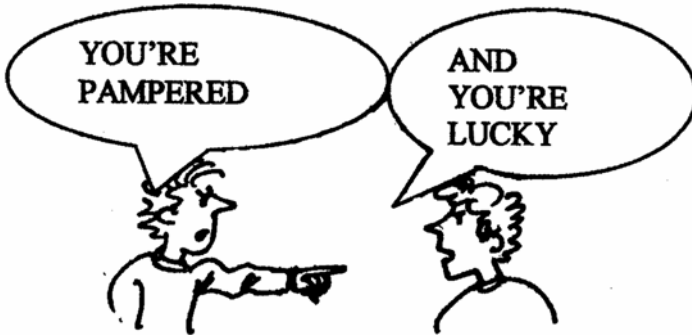
Obviously one concern for parents is the issue of guilt. 'What did I do wrong to make this happen to my child?' Guilt is one of the most difficult things for a parent to come to terms with and there are no easy ways for coping with it. Guilt is closely linked with anger. The whole family may often feel quite angry with the world and need to remember that there is no known cause of adolescent scoliosis. There is nothing you could have done to stop the development of the condition.

**The best way of dealing with the guilt and anger is to accept the condition.** You can't go through life without feeling discomfort from time to time, and this is one form of discomfort that we have to cope with.

Another form of discomfort is **jealousy**. Brothers and sisters of the child with scoliosis may resent the amount of time and attention that the child with scoliosis has to have. The child with scoliosis may be '**jealous**' of their '**normal**' sibling who is able to lead a full and active life without restriction. Jealousy is a complicated emotion which contains a lot of resentment, anxiety and worry. Often sibling jealousy revolves around the amount of time and attention a mother gives to the child with scoliosis. This can make other children

within the family resentful of the affected child.

- ❖ The most important thing about jealousy is to actually recognise that it exists. This makes it easier to deal with. Be prepared to give a bit of extra attention and affection to the jealous person. Be aware that they are unhappy and give them the extra love and care they would receive if they were ill. This is very effective as the sufferer will feel valued, special and worthwhile which will counteract the feelings of jealousy.
- ❖ Parents also need to make time for themselves. Having a child with scoliosis is very demanding both in time and energy and if you don't make time for yourself as an individual as yourselves as a couple then the whole family will suffer.



## HOW CAN PARENTS HELP?

Parents must remember that all children have different personalities. Some cope very easily with whatever is thrown at them while others can find it very difficult from the start, so each child's individual needs will be different.

On a positive note there is evidence to show that children who have to cope with adversity, learn particular coping skills that stand them in good stead later on in adult life.

Obviously parents can do a lot to help their children cope. It is evident, particularly at the time of surgery, that some form of psychological distress is inevitable.

**Your child will need to be able to trust you and this can be achieved by always being honest with them.**

There are times when you will need to be firm in certain decisions. Make sure that you are consistent as it will only cause confusion and insecurity if your child feels that you are unsure of the appropriate treatment and advice.

**It is very important that your child is constantly praised for their progress**

It is important for both you and your child to realise that it is clearly possible to come through the diagnosis and treatment of scoliosis and become a well adjusted and happy adolescent

This can only be achieved with a great deal of emotional support and guidance.

There are still children who will need a specialist to help them come to terms with their scoliosis. if you feel that your child needs extra help, discuss the situation with your Consultant who will be bale to refer you to a child psychologist. This can make a tremendous difference to acceptance of their condition and self esteem.