

**For Parents**



**More Wit and Wisdom for kids with diabetes  
(and their parents)**

# **Just for Parents**

When you became a parent, you began a lifelong journey. One that will take you and your child through times of incredible joy and sheer terror. Over bumpy roads and down peaceful rivers. Up treacherous cliffs and down the other side.

When your child is diagnosed with diabetes, that trip takes on new twists and turns. The path that seemed fairly direct and familiar to you may now overwhelm you with curves and switchbacks. Fortunately, there's help for travelers like yourself. Your child's medical team will point you in the right direction with advice on checking blood sugar levels, insulin, exercise, and diet. They'll help chart a course for her .

But some of the bumps and potholes you'll run into will be emotional ones. Guilt. Anger. Frustration and denial. Certainly diabetes isn't a trip down easy street. But the time you spend learning about these obstacles and how to get past them, will be time well spent in helping you on this all-important journey.

## **This Trip Begins With Denial**

Denial is a typical reaction to a diagnosis of diabetes. You and your child may try to ignore the news as long as possible. It's

\* To avoid the unwieldy "he/she" and still remain gender inclusive when referring to the child with diabetes, we have switched between "he" and "she" throughout this document.

tempting to think it was only a "touch of sugar." It'll all be better tomorrow.

Denial is our way of trying to change a painful reality into something less overwhelming. Something that feels more manageable — a path that feels less treacherous.

It's important that you allow yourself and your child to accept the changes diabetes brings. Getting past denial happens when the benefits of facing reality outweigh those of maintaining denial. It takes time. But getting through this process depends on it.

As you begin to accept the realities of diabetes, you'll serve as a role model. You and your child can begin to establish a new reality in your family life. With the many resources available to you as well as the support of family and friends, you can make it through. Step by step.

- ★ Find supportive people you can talk about diabetes. Tell them how you are feeling. Find other parents who have kids with diabetes. Friends. Ministers. Online chat rooms. A counselor. Your child's health care team. Just find someone. And encourage your child to do the same.

- ★ Learn as much about diabetes as you can. Then take advantage of any opportunity to teach your child. Information is power. And power is what you and your child need to live with diabetes.

### **Maneuvering the Road of Grief**

Whether you recognize it or not, a diagnosis of diabetes hits parents and children in much the same way as other major traumas. In fact, your reaction and emotions when you learn that your child has diabetes may be similar to a death in the family. Like death diabetes brings about dramatic changes in family life. Your daily routine changes. Spontaneity seems to flee the scene. Your self-image as the all-powerful protector takes a severe beating. Unexpected emotions lie in wait around every corner, while unanswered questions plague your everyday existence. You're on the road called grief.

While grief may hit you personally, it's important to remember that others have made this trip. A lot of bumps have been mapped. Some can't be avoided. But studying the journeys of others and giving your family time to grieve will be helpful to you and your child.

### **Coming Up On Anger**

It's not fair! No child should have diabetes. But especially not your child. It's perfectly normal to feel angry, even furious.

You might feel angry at yourself, your spouse, your child, your parents, the doctor who gave you the diagnosis, or even God. But what you're really angry at is diabetes.

Nursing anger is destructive. But feeling it and working through it is healthy. Accept

that this is a part of grieving. Find effective ways of dealing with your anger. And share them with your child who is probably pretty angry, too.

- ★ Realize you can choose your reaction and that this choice can be either helpful or not so. You can react passively and bury your feelings which will only prolong the grieving. You can react aggressively and lash out at others which might hinder much needed support from them. Or you can respond assertively by dealing with the situation. By owning up to your feelings and moving on. Help your child learn to be assertive.
- ★ Defuse anger by doing something active. Walking, running, biking, or swimming. Kick boxing might really fit the bill.
- ★ When anger comes up suddenly, step back, take a deep breath, and count to 10. Repeat as needed.
- ★ Some people find writing about their anger helps to alleviate it. Keep a journal. Write a poem. Or a song. Or a letter to diabetes and really let him have it!

### **The Valley Of Depression**

You've been told your child has diabetes. You've hoped that it will go away — but it doesn't. You've yelled and cried about it — but it's still there and until there's a cure, it'll always be there. With all that going on, who wouldn't feel depressed? It may be difficult for you to get through a day without crying and feeling sad or hopeless. You may feel tired all the time. And you may be thinking negative thoughts far more than you ever have before. You might notice

some of these reactions in your child, too. It's not unusual, it's not weird, you're not crazy. It's just another part of grieving. And it happens to everybody.

- ★ Physical exercise is one of the best antidotes to feeling depressed. Besides lifting your spirits, it's good for your heart and lungs.
- ★ Call the best listener you know and tell him how you are feeling.
- ★ Do something that you really like that has NOTHING to do with diabetes. Go shopping. Watch a movie. Meet a friend for coffee.
- ★ Do something with your child to take the focus off diabetes— even if it's only for a little while. Play Chinese checkers. Watch a music video. Offer to help clean his room.

If you notice that these feelings of depression are interfering with your daily routine, if you begin avoiding people or activities you've enjoyed in the past, or if you are just too tired to take care of everyday tasks, it might be a good time to check in with a doctor. Watch for these signs in your child, too. Find someone with whom you feel comfortable and who can help you or your child get through this difficult period.

### **Fear of Flying**

Fear and anxiety are connected at the hip with the diagnosis of diabetes. But your fears and anxieties need not— should not— rule your life. Or your child's. Typical fears expressed regarding diabetes include:

- ★ The fear of dying. Kids ask "Is that why it's called die-a-betes?"
- ★ Fears about complications.

- ★ A fear of needles which can extend to the lancet used to check blood.
- ★ Fear of hypoglycemia, sometimes called insulin reactions.
- ★ The fear of your child being different.

If these are things you have found yourself anxious about, you can bet your child is feeling the same way. Talking about fears can help to alleviate them. Begin by talking in general with her about your feelings and encourage her to share her feelings. "Some times diabetes scares me. Do you ever feel that way?"

Knowledge and experience are the keys to overcoming your fears and anxieties. Take time to learn about diabetes, about complications, injections, checking blood, hypoglycemia (low blood sugar), and hyperglycemia (high blood sugar). Help your child reduce his fears by showing him that diabetes can be managed once you have the necessary information and skills. "We'll learn all about this together. Then we can help each other and outsmart diabetes." Remember fearing something won't make it go away. Take action to control it.

### **This is a Long Journey**

Considering this disease will be with your child 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 (sometimes 366) days a year, it's easy to see that frustration will add some big bumps to this journey.

Sometimes it will be the ignorance and insensitivity of others toward your child that will cause frustration. Then there are those who, despite having good

intentions, become over-protective and try keep your child from being a normal kid. With diabetes.

Not only is this kind of treatment frustrating but it'll probably continue to happen throughout your child's life. Each time you confront someone about this type of behavior, it will be easier and your message will be more effective. Try some of the following:

- ★ Act assertively. Ask for the change you want, explain why you want it, and if necessary tell what steps you or your child will take to make it work. Repeat process as needed.
- ★ Remind the person you are speaking to that it is important for your child to have a normal, active, exciting childhood.
- ★ Take advantage of these opportunities to educate others about children and diabetes.
- ★ Get involved with the American Diabetes Association. Take part in fundraising walks, support groups for parents, volunteer at the camp in your area. Not only will joining in keep you upbeat and up-to-date, but you'll share with someone who needs to know what you've experienced and how you've managed.
- ★ Physical activity can help reduce the feelings of frustration just as it does with anger and depression.

There will be days when you and your child sit back and smile. Blood sugars have been within the target range. She has been eating right and getting exercise. Everything is going smoothly and you begin to think this diabetes thing might not be so bad after all. When suddenly things take a dramatic turn.

That's because your child lives in a human body. And they're unpredictable. In fact, one of the few predictable things about diabetes is that every so often, despite everyone's best efforts, things will go haywire.

And then there's the frustration. Frustration that sends everyone connected to diabetes— especially parents— right over the top. A cure. Or more accurately the lack of a cure. That's a frustration parents of children with diabetes have lived with for far too long. The best way to deal with it is to take action. Don't wait for the cure — help your child to live for it. Keep him healthy for the day there is a cure.

Dealing with frustrations created by others requires patience, stamina, knowledge, and diplomacy. At times we cause our own frustration by setting perfection as a goal in dealing with diabetes. But this can cause more frustration for you and your child than it's worth. It's far more important to strive for diabetes management, keeping in mind the unpredictable nature of the human body. Let this be your motto: perfection is only temporary. Shoot for control.

Don't feel you have to take on the weight of diabetes all by yourself. The same people you counted on before your child was diagnosed can help share your burden now. Grandparents, aunts and uncles, friends and neighbors can help relieve the stress and constant pressure you feel in dealing with diabetes. Whether it's lending a sympathetic ear or shoulder or babysitting while you run errands, work to allow this support to become a part of your diabetes management. As you learn about the disease, share

your knowledge with them. That way when you need their help they'll know how to help.

If you're a single parent, educating those around you about diabetes is even more important. You need friends and family to help out from time to time, and the more you keep them in the loop about your child's diabetes, the better off you'll be when you need that help.

### **Baggage Claim**

There's an unnecessary piece of baggage parents and children always seem to take on this journey. It's easy to carry along but amazingly difficult to lose. It's a bag of guilt. You can be sure you or child is feeling guilty when you think or hear things like:

- ★ Did she get diabetes from my side of the family?
- ★ I shouldn't have eaten those cookies.
- ★ I should have recognized that something was wrong sooner than I did.
- ★ Suppers are all messed up now that I have to be on this diet.
- ★ All Mom and Dad do is worry about me.
- ★ Does he have diabetes now because I didn't cook well enough for him before?
- ★ I bet I got diabetes because I haven't been minding Mom and Dad.

Harboring this kind of guilt doesn't do any good. The truth is that no one knows why certain people get diabetes and others don't. Nothing you did, or did not do, caused your son or daughter to have diabetes. And nothing your child did caused it either. Reassure your child (and

yourself) that no one deserves to have diabetes. No one is to blame.

Remember to strive for control, not perfection. This will help cut down on the feelings of guilt which come from not always doing exactly the right thing. Motivation is built on a foundation of self-confidence, not self-criticism. So always celebrate the successes. Refuse to minimize them.

### **Are We There Yet?**

The down side of this journey is that it will never end. It is a journey of constant searching, learning, and striving. The up side is you have already taken on this challenge. Your desire to learn more brought you to the American Diabetes Association and this information. Your interest and actions will serve as an excellent role model for your child. Start a support group, get active with the American Diabetes Association, participate in activities that raise money for diabetes like America's Walk for Diabetes or TEAM Diabetes. Volunteer at a summer camp for kids with diabetes. Call your local ADA office to get more information on things you and your child can do to get involved.

Together you can strive to manage diabetes, take on day-to-day challenges, celebrate the successes, and build a life which nurtures your child. Who just happens to have diabetes.

### **To Learn More:**

- ★ **Wisdom:** If you don't already have it, order the American Diabetes Association Wisdom™ kit for your family. They're free to kids with diabetes and are available by calling the American Diabetes

Association at 1-800-DIABETES (800-342-2383).

- ★ Magazines: **Diabetes Forecast** is a monthly magazine published by the ADA for people with diabetes and their families. It's free to members of the American Diabetes Association. Become a member by calling us at 1-800-DIABETES.
- ★ Books: The American Diabetes Association publishes a number of books about raising kids with diabetes. Try these: *The American Diabetes Association Guide to Raising a Child with Diabetes*, *The Ten Keys to Raising a Child with Diabetes*, *Sweet Kids: How to Balance Diabetes Control & Good Nutrition with Family Peace*, and *Real Life Parenting of Kids with Diabetes* (coming fall 2001). To purchase any of these books, please visit our online bookstore at [store.diabetes.org](http://store.diabetes.org)

- ★ This piece is one in a series about kids and diabetes. We have titles about type 2 diabetes in youth, school, family, and more. Call us at 1-800-DIABETES (800-342-2383) or download them by logging on to <http://www.diabetes.org/wizdom/pod.asp>
- ★ For more information on kids and diabetes, log onto our Web site at <http://www.diabetes.org/wizdom/>
- ★ For more advice and answers, log on to our Parents' Place Community Forum at [diabetes.org](http://diabetes.org). Click on "**Community and Resources**," then "**Community Forums**."
- ★ Questions or comments? Send us an e-mail at [wizdom@diabetes.org](mailto:wizdom@diabetes.org)

