Good afternoon everyone. I do need to correct one thing from my introduction. I am going to be 15 in a few weeks. At my age, almost 15 is way better than 14.

I was born with a unilateral cleft lip and palette. I had my first surgery – a lip adhesion – at 2 weeks. Since then, I’ve been through many more surgeries as I am sure you are all familiar with. I’ve had the common ones like a palette repair, lip revision, nose surgeries, as well as several surgeries to put in ear tubes and even some unrelated surgeries on my knee for a sports injury.

Throughout my life, there has been one consistent theme that keeps coming up: Self-Confidence. All parents want their kids to grow up and be self-confident. I think this idea applies to all kids. But it especially applies to kids who are different. Having a scar, large or small, right on your face is noticeable – and people are going to notice. Adults usually look but don’t mention it. But you an still see their eyes glance down at the scar. Kids, on the other hand, especially young ones – are very direct and often ask “what happened to your face.” Teenagers can go either way – sometimes they pretend to not notice just like the adults, or sometimes they decide to point it out to make sure everyone knows about it.

Self-confidence is a difficult topic. Lots of adults are not self confident. And the media and commercials are always telling us how none of us are good enough and we should change this or that about ourselves. Get something fixed. We need to buy all these products and certain brands of clothes will make us look better. It’s a difficult time to be so obviously different.

So how can parents help their kids build self-confidence? In my experience so far, there are 3 main topics that have helped.

1. Knowledge. As they say, knowledge is power. The school bus and the school lunchroom are full of bad information. Rumors are king in the hallways at school. And half of it is crazy stuff that no one would ever believe. But kids are so trusting. Little kids believe almost anything they are told.

I learned very early that I looked different. I have pictures of myself from before my surgeries. I actually have pictures of myself before an after each surgery – with all the bandages or arm splints or with crutches after they took the bone graft out of my hip. I have known I was different and why. It became important to my parents to make sure I learned things at home before I would learn the wrong thing on the playground

Once I knew why I had been born with a cleft, what it meant, what it meant for my future, I was in a better position to answer questions and laugh at the kids who tried to make fun of my scar. I realized how little they knew. Growing up, we had open discussions with my sisters and parents about different things that happened at school. Why some kids were mean to others. And it helped me understand and think about what might be causing that kid to act the way they did. Why did they feel the need to pick on others who might have looked different or talked different.

Information was important to help me understand why some people may have made fun of my scars or the way I spoke. And it also helped me to know how to stand up for myself and tell them information they didn’t know – explanations for why I had the scar. Actual information tends to stop rumors and mean comments quickly.

1. Experiences

The second topic I think helped me out was experiences. All kinds of experiences – good ones, bad ones, ones were I won or succeeded and even ones where I failed or maybe even got a little hurt.

All parents try to protect their kids. No one wants to see their kids face after they lose a big game or fall off their bikes. And parents of kids with disabilities or differences often try even harder to protect their kids. But at some point, every child has to go off on their own and learn to do things by themselves and for themselves, and also to protect themselves. No kid wants to lose or fail. But its an important step in building confidence.

I have played in lots of sports: Soccer, cross country, and most recently wrestling. Sometimes they go well, and sometimes they go bad – really bad. But sports teach us – in a simple and fair way – how to lose. Losing isn’t fun, but it teaches us stuff. And wining – while lots of fun – doesn’t always teach as much or teach us what we really need to learn

But its not just sports – its life experiences too. My sister is heading off to college in another year. And she is starting to realize that she doesn’t know how to cook very much. That could be a major problem. So she is now having to cook things for herself and for the family. Not everything turns out to be edible – but its good experiences for her. Half the time, the stuff my Dad cooks is way worse

I think its important for kids to go off and try new things or be allowed to fail. I am sure it is hard as a parent to watch your kid make a choice that you know will cause a problem – but its part of the learning process. The parents job is to support the kid and help them understand what happened and why. Building confidence is connected to trying new things, being allowed to succeed or fail. And knowing that even if I fail, my family and friends will still be there. And then, just like learning to ride a bike, after I fail 27 times, I figure it out and I’m off riding down the street. This is a key to building confidence.

When I was really little, I had one of my surgeries – a Lip revision I think. I hadn’t been allowed out of the house for about a week. We finally left and my parents took me to Target. Mom & Dad told me to take it easy, it was my first time out and I needed to be careful. We walked in the door and I knew exactly where the toys were so I took off running straight down the main aisle. Of course, I tripped and landed smack on my face. Some of the stitches inside my mouth and lip ripped out and I was bleeding. Trip to Target was over before it even began. We went home and saw the Doctor. My plastic surgeon took a look and explained that there was nothing to be done right away, but that we’d have to fix it again at a future surgery. She said it wasn’t as bad as it looked, but I had undone some of the work she had done during the surgery.

It was painful. It was upsetting, and it was annoying. But it wasn’t the end of the world. I learned that I have to be a little more careful after surgery until my body heals. That lesson came back to me just a few years ago when I had knee problems related to my soccer. They Doctor gave me specific instructions, and as much as I didn’t want to follow them – I tried harder to do what he said. I wore a full leg cast for 4 months through the summer one year. I missed out on a lot of things and complained but I knew it was important if I wanted my knee to get better. It didn’t actually work and I had to have surgery on the knee anyways, but I knew that I had done everything I could on my side to heal my knee.

1. Speech

The final topic I think is important for cleft kids is speech. I think its funny that a British accent is so cool, but someone with a lisp or other speech problem is weird. That’s too bad. Why can’t a lisp be cool and a British accent silly?

Next to the physical appearance, speech is another common difference that people notice and pick on.

I have taken speech therapy and done well. When I was little, I’m sure it was a pain for my mom to get me to therapy. And then when I went to school – I would be pulled out of class to go to my Speech class in another room. More convenient, but it was kind of annoying to have to drop what I was doing and go to therapy. Plus, none of the other kids in my class had to go to Speech therapy. So it again pointed me out as being different.

However, the benefits of speech therapy are great. Learning how to pronounce certain sounds better has been a great help. It makes it so I don’t end up with a problem communicating. And being able to speak clearly helps me speak up when someone is spreading false information or making jokes about me or anyone else because of difference.

The difficulty with Speech therapy is that it’s a roller coaster. Just when you think you have it nailed and you speak fine, something changes. With all of the surgeries that I have had and all of my braces and the jaw expander – my mouth shape is constantly changing and I’m having to relearn how to make certain sounds.

Just this week, as I was preparing to come down to this conference and speak – my Orthodontist and dentist decided I needed 3 teeth pulled – right away. All 3 of them are on the top. =I guess, it was good to get rid of the last of my baby teeth before I turned 15. But I realized I would have to give this speech with a bunch of space in my mouth – so I would sound funny again.

So speech, is a rollercoaster of a problem. But in my mind its very important. All the self confidence in the world can’t be seen if I can’t express myself clearly and be understood.

And that brings me to the ‘blessing in disguise’ of being born with a cleft. I believe that because of my cleft, I am more confident and independent than many of my peers. And I think maybe a little kinder too. I think about the person inside, and not the person I can see or hear. Even the popular crowd or “Jocks” or Mean Girls” as they are often called – I think about what makes them the way they are.

I have had experiences and had to learn about parts of life very differently than my friends without physical challenges. I have noticed that lots of other people with differences end up being more independent and don’t worry as much about the worldly things we always see in the media. I still like to look nice, although Mom would argue and want to date a pretty girl, but I know there is more to the person than looks.

I know this view is not always true of those with differences. But I think because of Knowledge, many many experiences, and learning to speak clearly and confidently, those with differences have a chance at understanding the world around them better and making it a better place.