

2 HELPER ARMS

Growing up was a little different for me. I got my first prosthetic arm when I was ten months old. I call prosthetics “helper arms.” My first helper arm wasn’t super easy to use, but it helped me build muscles. Strangely enough, that was just what I needed with that old arm. I was born with weakness in my neck and torso. That meant I had a hard time sitting up on my own. My first helper arm helped me get stronger. I have always traveled out of state to get prosthetics made. (My parents tried to build one with a company in my town, but

I grew out of it in a couple of weeks. My mom wasn't going to go through an experience like that again.)

I've used helper arms for most of my life. Today, my helper arms still make me stronger and help me do specific things like hold on to a bike handle or do push-ups.

They haven't been super "handy," but they have helped me stay healthy. Helper arms have also trained my body to know what it's like to have two hands. Think about your arms. If you have two shoulders, two elbows, and two hands, you probably don't pay a lot of attention to how they work. But if you watch how you move, you'll see that you move your elbows a lot more than your shoulders. I use my left shoulder like an elbow, so I sometimes overuse it. My prosthetics give my shoulder a break from all that extra work. My parents are constantly worried about me overusing my shoulder, which could cause other physical issues later on.

Besides the practical use, wearing prosthetics means I get a chance to show off my sense of fashion and design. Ever since I was little, I've had a chance to decide what kind of "skin" I want with my helper arms. I've worn a

Disney Princess arm, a Hello Kitty arm, and lots of others with pretty colors, including blues, greens, purples, and even a sparkly blue.

THErapy

Even though I was determined to do things my way, some things were not easy for me when I was little. I took a really long time learning to walk. Instead, I would scoot around on my butt. I was really fast, but it wasn't the most efficient way to get around. My parents called me "Swiffer Butt" because I was always cleaning the floor as I moved, just like a mop. My body just needed to do things a little differently from some kids.

Up until I was in third grade, I saw a physical and occupational therapist every week. My therapists helped me build muscles and figure out tiny tasks that might be tricky with one hand (or tricky with one hand and a helper arm). Think about opening those milk cartons they sell at school. Or opening a juice pouch. Try

opening a potato chip bag with one hand, without your teeth! (My mom doesn't like me opening anything with my teeth.) Those are just a few skills I would work on so I didn't need to ask for a lot of help in the school cafeteria.

All the hard work I did when I was little made it easier to participate in other activities, like soccer (which I don't like) and dancing (which I love!).

Now, I'm a really active kid, but prosthetics aren't helpful for me to wear all the time. They can feel like they're in the way or they don't really help with a specific activity. Since I can't—and don't want to—wear them all the time, physical therapy is a good way to keep an eye on any damage I might cause my body. I have to visit a physical therapist every once in a while to make sure I'm not causing serious damage. I know one-handed adults who needed major shoulder or wrist surgeries because they didn't listen to their bodies when things hurt from overuse. Outside of therapy, I try to work out with my sports and with weights when I have time to go to the gym. I learned a lot of adaptive workouts with a really great CrossFit Kids coach. I also try to follow some yoga

and Pilates exercises. Keeping my core strong is a really great way to make sure I'm healthy.

Sometime during elementary school, I was seeing a physical therapist about shoulder pain when I mentioned I couldn't touch my toes. It hurt too much. It turns out, I wasn't walking properly. My therapist told me I was holding my little arm to my side and not moving it when I walked or ran. That started hurting the muscles in my legs. People tend to think that my little arm and prosthetic are specifically the only things that I have to strengthen and work on, but it actually has an effect on my entire body! I had to relearn how to walk and run! I really had to think about moving both of my arms to get my legs working the right way. Wearing my prosthetic arm was another way to help remind me that I needed to move my arms when I walked. It took a couple of months, but I always remember to move both sides of my body. And when I run now, I'm really fast.

**BUT IT'S SO HARD, MOMMY: A NOTE FROM
JORDAN'S MOM, JEN
(FROM A 2013 BLOG POST; JORDAN WAS SEVEN)**

For almost all eight years I've written this blog, I've focused on Jordan's health. Everything I do is focused on making sure she is strong mentally and physically. That's why we've made a glorious return to occupational therapy to prevent periodic shoulder pain. Our recent appointments have shown Jordan's left shoulder blade is weak and it could be to blame for some of her recent clavicle pain. Her shoulder also has some slight separation as well.

Jordan has *always* been a piece of work during occupational and physical therapy appointments. Always. She acts goofy, she half listens, she challenges the therapist to the core. It's a big reason why I worked with the same OT for most of Jordan's life. She figured out how to deal with Jordan most of the time. Our new therapist is managing all of those personality challenges without the history. We're trying really hard to make the most out of the hour we see her each week.

During this week's appointment, Jordan was intro-

duced to four new yoga exercises. Initially she was really excited because I often talk about how yoga is great exercise. Now that the helper arm is back in play, we were able to work on some exercises that were really challenging. They hurt. The exercises required attention, focus, and using muscles in ways that hurt Jordan. Not end-of-the-world hurt, but enough that it wasn't fun. *Not. One. Bit.*

Trying to get Jordan to participate and learn the positions enough times for her and me to understand what was expected was a bit taxing. Jordan wanted to play, and working hard during therapy isn't fun.

But we did it. We survived another appointment.

As we drove away, I asked Jordan if she understood why we go to occupational therapy. She said she didn't know, even though we talked about it a few weeks ago. So I told her about limb-different teenagers and adults I've met who have chronic pain. Others I know deal with pain if they don't exercise often enough. I explained to Jordan that my goal as her mom is to help her learn ways to stay strong and do whatever we can to prevent her from hurting a lot. A little bit of work can stop a lot of hurt when she's older.

"But it's so hard, Mommy."

Oh, my heart. I know, baby. I reminded Jordan how a year ago, she couldn't even run a couple of blocks with me. But we've worked and worked and she ran a whole mile with me without stopping last week. It took effort and hard work, but it got easier. I promised her that it will continue to get easier.

That's when she asked me what I did when I had to do yoga when I was little. And I had to explain that I didn't have to do exercises like that when I was little. I have a different body . . . and I don't know what it's like to know that I have to work hard just to make sure I'm not in pain when I get older. But I promised her, and I mean this: I will be her cheerleader and helper every step of the way. This hard work will be worth it. It will.