



Every child and every parent copes differently with alopecia areata. There are no rules, and every day brings new challenges. Children who have just discovered their first bald spot will react differently than children their same age who have had alopecia areata all their lives. The sudden onset of this condition can be very frightening for all concerned. And living for any period of time—whether brief or long—with unpredictable hair loss presents many challenges.

At the same time, children seek to assert their independence from the first step they take until they leave the nest. Some of the challenges you will face as a parent of a child with alopecia areata will be related to the alopecia areata and others to growing up. How will you know the difference? Often you won't, but you need to constantly ask yourself questions and listen to yourself as a parent.

What should you do? First, learn all you can about alopecia areata. Second, answer your child's questions directly and honestly. Third, always hug your child and look them in the eye and tell them that they are beautiful. But don't forget about your family rules; don't let alopecia areata define your child—or determine the type of parent you are.

### What is alopecia areata?

Alopecia areata is a common condition that results in hair loss on the scalp and elsewhere. It usually starts with one or more small, round, smooth bald patches and can progress to total body hair loss. This hair loss can also reverse itself, or come and go. It occurs in males and females of all ages, but children are affected most often.

### Do children react differently than adults to alopecia areata?

A 12-year-old boy and a 40-year-old woman may share the fact that they have lost their hair, but each brings to the encounter different ways of thinking about his or her life and must adjust to different emotional experiences and social environments.

### Does the age of the child with alopecia areata affect how they react?

Yes, the impact of hair loss is more or less significant to children depending on their age.



### How do children age 5 or younger react?

Very little. Alopecia areata may have little impact, if any, on children up to the age of 5. Preschool children are so busy exploring their world, acquiring skills, and gaining independence that their appearance is virtually immaterial to themselves and their peers. Their hair loss may be an interesting anomaly and nothing more. Most likely their peers will not take much notice of their difference.



### How do children ages 6 to 12 react?

Between the ages of 6 and 12, children have interacted with enough people to grasp the idea that experiences and views of the world differ, and they begin to realize that it is important to pay attention to what others think and feel. While this ability to see things as others do helps children become more empathetic and considerate, it also tends to make children more conscious of difference. Children at this stage of development are much more concerned about how others view them, how they may differ from others, and whether others are making fun of them. Since children at this age are more aware of individual differences, they unfortunately are more likely to poke fun at those who don't fit their definition of normal.

Even children who have had alopecia areata since infancy face new problems of adjustment. Peers are becoming a more significant part of their life and the desire to fit in is becoming stronger. Even children with a very healthy self-concept may feel threatened. But if children feel good about themselves and have at least one skill in which they excel, the odds are increased that they will deal successfully with these difficulties.

### How do teenagers react?

Alopecia areata can be especially hard on teenagers. As a child enters adolescence, self-consciousness reaches a peak. Teenagers have acquired the cognitive skills that enable them to think much more introspectively. Their strong tendency to analyze

themselves is often projected onto others to the point that they feel they are on stage, believing that even the slightest physical difference or flaw is noticed by others. The adolescent also often desperately wants to blend in with the group, avoiding public criticism or ridicule. For girls in particular, a stylish, natural-looking hairpiece can be very important. For both girls and boys, being involved in a variety of activities helps them focus less on their appearance and more on things over which they have some control, such as academic, musical, or athletic skills.



### How do I, as a parent, deal with a child with alopecia areata?

Parenting a child with alopecia areata can be difficult. Parents of children with alopecia areata need to keep two things in mind: 1) Children can be much more resilient than we imagine, and children are generally optimistic, they don't expect rejection or ridicule because they haven't experienced or observed it as much as adults have. 2) Children take their cues from the adults in their world, particularly their parents, and if children see that their hair loss is a source of anxiety or sadness for these adults, they will internalize those feelings.

This does not mean that you should ignore or repress your feelings of loss, sorrow, or anger when you are trying to cope. These feelings are natural and to be expected—along with mistaken feelings of guilt about somehow being responsible for your child's hair loss. (If you read the NAAF brochure in which

*children with alopecia areata* talk about their feelings, it is obvious that they **don't blame their parents.**)

### Can children change how they are dealing with alopecia areata?

Parents must remember that a 10-year-old who seems totally accepting of his condition can turn into a 13-year-old who is unable to cope with alopecia areata or wearing a hairpiece.

### What is the most important thing to keep in mind as a parent?

Be understanding and sensitive, and listen. If you do this you will be able to observe how your child's thinking is affecting their emotions, their behavior and their relationships. It will strengthen your parent-child relationship and help you be a more effective parent of a growing child with changing needs, views, worries, and hopes. Your child will guide you in what they want to do. If your child wants to wear a hairpiece, they will let you know. Don't force what you want on them. They will let you know what will make them feel more comfortable.

The most important thing you can do as a parent is to let your child know they are special—and they are loved with or without hair.

### Is it important to give information on alopecia areata to my child's school?

Yes. It is important to educate school administrators and teachers, as well as other students and their parents about alopecia areata. Contact NAAF for a School Packet, which has lesson plans, bibliographies, and information for educators. NAAF also has resources your child can share with friends and fellow students.

## How can you help your child if they are bullied?

Let them know they are not alone. There are plenty of kids all over the world who go through the same things every day. Let them know there are many things they can do to help stop the bullying. Here are some tips to share with your child:

**Always tell an adult.** It's hard to talk about serious things with adults sometimes, but they can help put a stop to bullying. Tell an adult that you trust and can talk to—your parents, your teacher, your school counselor, your coach, or your neighbor.

**Stay in a group.** Kids who bully like to pick on kids who are by themselves a lot; it's easier and they're more likely to get away with their bad behavior. If you spend more time with other kids, you will not be an easy target and you will have others around to help you if you get into a difficult situation!

**If it feels safe, try to stand up to the person who is bullying you.** If the person who is bullying you thinks you won't do anything about it, they are more likely to keep picking on you. This doesn't mean you should fight back or bully them back. Instead, tell the person bullying you that you don't like it and that they should stop! Keep it simple. You might just say, "Cut it out, Miranda!" and then walk away. If possible, try to talk to them in a calm voice. Kids who bully often like to see that they can make you upset.



**If you are being bullied online, don't reply.** Replying may actually make the bullying worse. Instead, be sure to tell a family member or another adult you trust. If possible, block any more communications from this person. (It might be a good idea only to accept messages from people you know.) Save evidence of the bullying. If you get a nasty email, print it out or save it so that you can show it to an adult.

**Don't think it's your fault.** Nobody deserves to be bullied!



**Don't fight back or bully back.** This probably won't make things any better and it might get you into big trouble. Besides, you should try to act better than the person who bullies you.

**Don't keep it to yourself and just hope the bullying will go away.** It's normal to want to try to ignore bullying and hope that it will stop—or hope that the person will start to pick on someone else. But often bullying won't stop until adults and other kids get involved. So be sure to report the bullying.

**Don't skip school or avoid clubs or sports because you're afraid of being bullied.** Missing out on school or activities that you enjoy isn't the answer. You have a right to be there!

**Don't think that you're a tattletale if you tell an adult that you've been bullied.** Telling is NOT tattling! It's the right thing to do.

**Don't hurt yourself.** Some kids who are bullied get so sad and depressed that they may try to hurt themselves because they think there is nothing else they can do. This definitely isn't the answer. Talk with an adult immediately and tell them how you are feeling. They can help stop the bullying.

## What other materials and resources are available to me as a parent?

The National Alopecia Areata Foundation has letters, articles, and brochures for parents and children; print and electronic newsletters; pen pal lists; support groups throughout the world; a school packet; DVDs; an informational website with message boards; a Facebook fan page; and a Twitter page.



## A Parent's Guide to Alopecia Areata

Alopecia Areata is a common condition which results in the loss of hair on the scalp and elsewhere. It usually starts with one or more small, round, smooth patches and can progress to total hair loss. It occurs in males and females of all ages, but young persons are affected most often.

For support and more information contact:

National Alopecia Areata Foundation  
14 Mitchell Blvd.  
San Rafael, CA 94903  
415.472.3780  
415.472.5343 (fax)  
www.naaf.org  
info@naaf.org

Copyright© 2011 by the  
National Alopecia Areata Foundation



## A Parent's Guide