

CHAPTER

4

HANDS

With Differences

A SEVEN-YEAR OLD GIRL—LET’S CALL HER JULIE—AND her mom and grandmother came to see me in the office one day. The exam room was quiet when I walked in, but they were having an animated conversation—in sign language. When she was listening and wasn’t signing, I could count Julie’s fingers, six fingers on one hand and seven on the other, but no thumbs. Through the sign language interpreter, I learned that the family was there to have this rare congenital difference addressed so that Julie could more easily hold a pen, tie her shoes, and do the other things thumbs are good for. I explained that I could remove the extra digits, which would leave normal small, ring, middle, and two index fingers on both hands. I recommended then shortening and rotating the outside index fingers to make thumbs. The interpreter commented that these corrections would also likely make Julie’s signing easier to understand.

The operations were successful. Not only was Julie’s ability to use her hands for everyday tasks markedly better, she could now sign clearly even to strangers and casual acquaintances. I realized that this was my one chance as a hand surgeon to correct a speech impediment. More broadly, it reminds me of the ways people can find their way in life by

The Hand Owner's Manual

Other topics covered in Chapter 4: Hands with Differences

INDIVIDUAL VARIATION

Double joints and other person-to-person differences

CIVILIZATION, COURTESY OF THE HUMAN THUMB

Methods of thumb reconstruction: beg, borrow, or steal

LESS THAN TEN

Surgeons who function with missing fingers

MAN FROM THE SOUTH

A Roald Dahl short story about the value of a finger

ARTIFICIAL FINGERS

Cosmetic substitutions, pros and cons

SINGLE-HANDED SUCCESSES

Distinguished amputees in sports and music

LEFTIES IN A RIGHTEOUS WORLD

The perils of left handedness extend even to underwear

CHIEF LEFT HAND

Biosketch of a notable Arapaho Indian chief

GO LEFT, YOUNG MAN

How to get to Left Hand, West Virginia