

PAIRED TEXTS

One topic, two texts



Big Idea Charlie keeps one main idea in mind when dealing with his differences. As you read, think about what that might be.



LOOK FOR
WORD NERD'S
4 TERMS IN
BOLD

WHAT MAKES CHARLIE AWESOME?

For Charlie Zucker and the people who know him, his talents are way more important than his differences.

by Kara Corridan

"The finger stuff wasn't a big deal. No one said a word."

That's how Charlie Zucker, 11, describes what it was like to start middle school last fall. He's explaining that nobody seemed to care about his hands. Charlie was born with a condition that affects his hands and feet. He has two fingers on each hand and two toes on each foot. His 14-year-old brother Ethan has the same condition. So does his mom.

But the way he looked *used* to be a big deal. When Charlie was in preschool and kindergarten, kids would stare at him. "I know you're looking at me," he used to tell them, annoyed. As he got older, he

understood why they were surprised by his hands. "But I started to **progressively** not care anymore."

Like Everyone Else

Once kids got to know Charlie, they realized that he wasn't that different from them. His hands didn't stop him from doing anything. Charlie plays baseball. He plays soccer. He rides horses. He uses an iPad. He can zip his jacket and tie his shoes. And some of his favorite activities are playing piano and drawing. He's created a comic-book series. Each book is 50 pages long. He's on his fifth book!

progressively: a little bit at a time



Big brother Ethan, sister Savanna, and Charlie, on vacation last summer

If you ask him what he *can't* do because of his hands, it'll take him a while to think of something. "There aren't many **disadvantages**," he finally says. "There's a certain water bottle I can't open. But I can do some things better than other people." His handwriting is excellent, for instance.

How Humor Helps

Charlie has figured out one way to handle the stares and the questions: He makes jokes. If someone asks, "What's wrong with your fingers?," Charlie will

look down and pretend to be shocked. "Wait! *What?!*" he'll exclaim, as if he didn't know what his hands look like.

Some people have been so nervous asking Charlie about his hands that they mess up their question. "Why do you only have two hands?" they'll ask. "Well, how many do *you* have?" Charlie will reply with a friendly smile.

As for those who are uncomfortable around Charlie, he has a simple answer. "That's their biz. It's not my job to **clarify** things for them. I don't have to change what people think of me."

disadvantages: problems

clarify: make things clearer

How to Handle Being Teased

Charlie gets stares and questions, but his older brother Ethan was bullied by older kids when he was in first grade. This is how Ethan learned to deal with it. His advice can help anyone who's being picked on.

- **If people are rude**, you won't be able to control them. Try not to show them your feelings. Walk away. Talk to a grown-up if they don't stop.

- **When kids ask you questions** about the thing that makes you different, answer them. But also ask them about themselves. Start a regular conversation.



Ethan, on his way to school

- **Remind yourself** that truly happy kids are never mean on purpose.

- **Get busy** with things you really enjoy. Kids will focus more on what you are doing than on how you look.

- **Practice** dealing with kids who are mean. Ask your parent or your best friend to play the role of the mean kid. This will help you figure out what to say.

But he's learned something helpful: "If I get to know someone, they'll pay much less attention to my hands," he says. "And if they do ask about them, they'll feel more comfortable." Charlie will feel more comfortable too.

The Bigger Challenge

There is one thing that makes life tricky for Charlie. It has nothing to do with his hands. It's his 10-year-old

sister Savanna's nut allergy. If she eats any nuts, she could stop breathing.

So Charlie worries about his sister. "I have a big **anxiety** now," he says. "I think I care more about her allergy than she does." Then Charlie stops. He's thinking hard about something.

"Maybe—I'm just realizing this—she's just used to it," he says.

Just like he's used to his hands. ■

anxiety: worry

THINK AND WRITE

What would you like people to notice most about you? Send your answer in a well-organized essay to "Charlie Contest." Ten winners will each receive a copy of *Spaghetti in a Hot Dog Bun* by Maria Dismody. See details on page 2.

**FIND AN
ACTIVITY
SHEET
ONLINE!**