

## Steve's story

I was born on the 16th August 1972, so at the time of writing this I'm now 36 years old. I have a brother who's 11 months older than me who was born with a cleft lip and pallet; I was born with a cleft lip.

I've been told that both my brother and I had soft-tissue corrective surgery at an age of 3 months. Obviously my brother and myself have no recollection of this surgery, so the only real heartache at this time of our lives must have been for our parents, and boy that must have been difficult. I have a child myself now and can only imagine how painful it would be to see your child go through several hours of facial surgery at such a young age.

If you are a parent with a young child going through this surgery, please go easy on yourself, its not your fault, kids heal really quickly and they won't remember anything about it anyway.

I could spend my time hear talking about what my parents have told me of their experiences, but I shall try to keep it to my own experiences.

As a young child I realised that my brother and I were slightly different from other kids, but I don't remember this being a hard thing to deal with, we were the way we were, and that was all we'd ever known.

High school however was tough, as many kids are putting others down to boost their own self-esteem and social position and typically kids will pick on any point that differentiates one from another. I'm sure this is a difficult time for any child, however I do believe it was harder for my brother and I purely because our cleft lips were an easy target and essentially it was our facial appearance that other children were picking up on - after all, there's not much that's more personal about the way you look.

Had I known at the time that the jibes we were receiving were from insecure children trying to boost their own self-esteem, I would have pitied those poking fun at my brother and I for our scars and so on. As it was though, I didn't understand the true reasons for the ridicule, took much of it at face value and consequently, I did find this stage of my life very hard to cope with. The moral here is talk to your children and help them understand the world around them. Adolescence is hard enough as it is and this is a time to be especially mindful of your child if they have any sort of facial disfigurement.

With time I learned the true reasons why kids can be so cruel, but in all honesty this wasn't a lesson I learned until adulthood, which was too late to help me as an adolescent. I found it very hard to make friends (and in fact stopped trying) as I lacked even the slightest self confidence and ultimately, I got in with the wrong crowd and consequently into trouble.

I left school with no real friends, no qualifications and little confidence in my own abilities as well as appearance. To be honest at this young adult age I felt I was distasteful to even look at. My brother and I have both discussed since this time that we self-harmed around this age, yet neither of us knew the other was doing it, and both of us felt very alone.

I appreciate this is a difficult age for most children however I do believe having a cleft lip made it harder.

In my opinion, if there's a time a parent can be of most help to a child with or without a cleft lip / pallet it's during adolescence, with guidance, reassurance, love, space and understanding. For my brother and I this was a time when our parents split up and spent most of their time bickering and squabbling, which perhaps why we found this time of our lives so hard.

My brother had a great many operations more than I did, due to his cleft pallet as well as lip. I won't go into the gory details of the specific operations we had here, suffice to say we both had bone-graphs at around 18 years old, to construct missing facial bones caused by the cleft-lip / pallet. It was also this time that we both found good friends and started to become the adults we are today.

From my experiences, I firmly believe it is the hardship in life that makes us stronger. I have found as an adult that I have a great deal of inner strength and self-belief. I am confident and happy. I believe a great deal of my inner strength must have come from the harder times of my life, and how I learned to cope with them. I have a strong ability to control negative emotions, council other people and I am highly analytical. Would I be this way were it not for my cleft lip? I doubt it.

If I now had a magic wand I could wave, which would mean I wasn't born with a cleft lip, I'd never use it, as I now accept myself as I am, my cleft lip is part of me and part of what has made me the man I am today. I wouldn't change a thing.

Steve Bungard.