



1504 East Franklin Street, Suite 102
Chapel Hill, NC 27514

OFFICE (919) 933-9044 FAX (919) 933-9604 EMAIL info@Cleftline.org

A note from the CPF staff:

Gina Butchin attended Connections 2009 and shared her story as part of the Blessings-in-Disguise panel. One of the common questions we've heard from teens with facial differences surrounds dating. After Gina shared her story, we asked her for her feelings on the issue.

You'll see Gina's response below, but in an email to CPF, Gina also shared the following:

The answer to their [teens with facial differences] question as you know is less about their facial difference and more about their self confidence, but how you tell that to a teenager becomes quite challenging. I guess if I were talking to a young woman – with or without a facial difference – my answer would be the same.

I was born with a bilateral complete cleft lip and palate. My family decided to stop the corrective procedures when I was 10, so I grew up with obvious scars, an uneven lip, a flat nose and a voice that, at times, was a bit difficult to understand. I did not date a lot in high school; as a matter of fact I only had one boy friend. But then in college, I dated a bit more and eventually married an amazing man. We now have two adorable little boys. It was not until after my second child was born that I began the process of finding a surgeon and creating the face I see in the mirror today.

It is hard to answer why some girls get asked out and others do not. There are many reasons ranging from the social circles they run in to the abundance or scarcity of opportunities to meet boys in a situation where they are comfortable to ask. However one thing is true – self-esteem; the way you think about yourself and what you expect of yourself has a huge impact.

I did not date a lot in high school, but I also had very low self-esteem. I was quiet, so quiet I whispered when I spoke. In college, I began to come out of my shell and became more comfortable and confident in myself. Coincidentally I started dating more. Actually, I don't believe it was a coincidence at all.

As a small child I am sure the persistent criticism and teasing contributed to my shyness. Just as the successes I experienced in college helped me develop confidence. When you change the way you think and feel about yourself, it changes the way other people perceive you.

The first step is to accept yourself, from your eye and skin color to your height, body shape and yes even the surgical scars. These are all things that not only cannot be changed, but also what make you unique. Once you are comfortable with yourself, others will be comfortable with you too. Sending out the message of confidence, walking with your head held high and being sure of who you are will go along way in getting boys to notice you.

On the flip side, I would like to point out that many girls who are considered to be traditionally attractive don't get asked out either. This is because many of the boys who would ask them out are intimidated by them or assume they already have dates etc. My college roommate was by all standards beautiful and she never got asked out – ever. The entire time we lived together, she never had a date. She would worry about it and wonder about it, and then she decided to take matters into her own hands. Instead of waiting to be asked, she would ask the boys out!

The greatest thing you can do for yourself is enjoy life and all that comes along with it; the best way to do that is to enjoy yourself. I know that sounds lame, but it is the truth. Take it from someone who has been there.

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