Bernie’s Secret
Summer was finally over and school was about to begin. Bernie felt both excited and scared. He wanted to start school, but Bernie hoped his classmates wouldn’t tease him about his psoriasis like those kids at the playground over the summer.

The skin flakes and red spots of his psoriasis are what made the kids tease Bernie. Sometimes they acted like Bernie’s skin was all there was of him, and it made his stomach tight. There was so much more to know about him, Bernie felt.

With a deep breath, Bernie tried to remember how much fun kindergarten had been. But his new school was totally different. It was BIG — a big building, a big playground and big kids. He didn’t know anyone there, and it seemed impossible he would ever fit in.
Bernie finished breakfast and was waiting for his school “buddy,” a third-grader chosen to introduce the new first-grader to school on the first day. When the doorbell rang, Bernie opened it to see a big kid shifting from side to side. Bernie knew he was being rude, but he couldn’t take his eyes off the boy’s mismatched sneakers and the backward baseball hat. “Doesn’t he know how to get dressed?” Bernie wondered.

Even with the warm sun shining brightly, Bernie’s mom wasn’t surprised to see him dressed in a long-sleeved shirt and jeans. He had always felt more comfortable covering his psoriasis when meeting new people, but she hoped he’d get over the embarrassment someday.
Sam introduced Bernie to the older kids as “his friend” and that gave Bernie an instant ‘in.’ Everyone kept asking Bernie, “Aren’t those long sleeves hot?” but Bernie smiled and shrugged. No way was he going to roll up his sleeves.

Bernie was starting to think school wasn’t so bad after all. Then the warning bell rang, and his stomach turned somersaults. Sam was happy and excited, but Bernie was just trying to remember how to get to his classroom. Suddenly, they stood in a doorway and Sam said to the teacher, “This is Bernie.” Then Sam turned to Bernie and said, “I gotta go. I’ll get you for recess.”

Behind him, the classroom door flew open as kids took their seats, some near new friends, some alone. Bernie sat next to a boy who seemed alone, too, and they smiled. “You look hot in those long sleeves,” said the boy.

Finally, the older boy said, “My real name is Samuel, but you can call me Sam — all my friends do. I’ll take you to your classroom, then I’ll come get you for recess and lunch. Then, I’ll walk you home after school.” Bernie nodded without much energy.

“Aren’t you going to be hot in those long sleeves?” Sam asked.

“I’ll be fine,” Bernie sighed, pulling a sleeve down so it covered his hand. He wished he could cover his head with a blanket and just skip this day altogether.

As they walked to the school playground, it seemed like everyone knew Sam, and Bernie was glad to have the company. Kids stopped playing and called to Sam, everyone saying “hi” to him. The new kids, like Bernie, were standing around hoping someone would talk to them.
The teacher started class by introducing herself. “Good morning, class, my name is Ms. Chapman. Now why don’t each of you introduce yourself.” When Bernie stood up to say his name, one of the boys asked if he was hot. A curly-haired girl asked, “Why don’t you roll up your sleeves?” Bernie was at a loss for words. He wanted to explain but, “I can’t . . .” was all he said as he sat down.

“I’ll help you,” said the girl, and before he could think, Bernie had two classmates, one on each side, pulling up his sleeves.

“NO!” he shouted. Both of them stopped, but it was too late. Bernie jerked backwards and pulled his arms away with one sleeve above his elbow, showing his psoriasis.
Bernie stayed in the bathroom by himself for a long time. He splashed water on his eyes and washed his hands. Then he tucked in his shirt and arranged his sleeves the way he liked them. Finally, he leaned against the cold, tile walls and wished he could go home, or go away, anything so he never had to go back to that classroom.

There it was. Even as Bernie quickly pulled down the sleeve, everyone had seen it. Bernie was so ashamed. He couldn’t make a sound and was tongue-tied by his secret. He felt stuck and couldn’t move, and he knew he was about to cry.

The teacher walked over to his seat, as his classmates watched. She put one arm around Bernie’s shoulders as she bent down, “Would you like to go to the bathroom and fix yourself up?” Bernie nodded, afraid to answer, afraid to look up. The morning had gone so well — and now it was ruined. Everyone knew. His sleeves had protected him for a while, but now his classmates had seen the redness on his arms and he knew the teasing was about to start. With a hot face, Bernie left for the bathroom, leaving behind the staring eyes and small whispers of his classmates.
Suddenly, Sam appeared in the bathroom door.
“I heard you were upset,” said Bernie’s new friend.
“I came to get you for recess, but the teacher wants you to go back to the classroom first. She’s waiting for you with the rest of the class.” Bernie closed his eyes and sighed. Following Sam, Bernie walked back to the classroom with a huge sense of dread. As he opened the door, the boy and the girl who had pulled up his sleeves stood up. The quiet talking in the room stopped when he walked in. “I’m sorry, Bernie,” said the girl. “We didn’t mean to bother you, we wanted to help you,” said the boy. “I’m sorry,” they both said together. Bernie nodded and smiled.

“From reading your record, I learned that the redness and flakes on your arm have been there since you were very young,” said Ms. Chapman. “Will you tell us more about it, Bernie?” she asked.
Bernie took a big gulp. “It’s called psoriasis and it’s because my skin grows faster than most people’s,” Bernie explained. “It itches and sometimes it hurts, but I put medicine on every night so it won’t hurt as bad.”

“How’d you get it?” asked the boy who had pulled up Bernie’s sleeve.

“Doctors don’t know why I got it, but you can’t get it from me,” answered Bernie.

Bernie looked around the room when he finished talking. He felt relieved that it was out in the open. His classmates were looking at him, but not staring like they had before. The looks were friendly, some of them were smiling at him.
Lunch with Sam was a busy time — but not because of Sam. Everyone wanted to sit by Bernie, to share lunch with him, or to have him listen to their stories. The kids seemed to have accepted Bernie’s psoriasis. They made him the center of attention — and he liked it.
On the way home, Bernie and Sam agreed — school was good. Bernie held up his arm so Sam could see it. “I was afraid the kids would tease me because of my psoriasis,” Bernie said.

Sam pulled up his shirt to show Bernie the long, dark birthmark that colored his side and chest. “Everyone’s seen this, too, but I just explain it so people don’t tease me. The more people understand, the less they care about differences.”

Bernie nodded, smiled, and rolled up his sleeves. He liked feeling the cool air on his arms. From now on, he decided, he would be like Sam and explain his psoriasis so he wouldn’t get teased.
MORE INFORMATION

The National Psoriasis Foundation is the resource for complete information about psoriasis and psoriatic arthritis. Please contact us.

National Psoriasis Foundation
6600 SW 92nd Avenue
Suite 300
Portland, OR 97223-7195

Phone: 503.244.7404 or 1.800.723.9166
Fax: 503.245.0626
E-mail: education@psoriasis.org
Web site: www.psoriasis.org