

11-16 years. Supporting a child with a disfigurement: a teacher's guide

Guide 7. Practical Support with Social Skills

A young person with a disfigurement may sometimes struggle in social situations. Different behaviours may demonstrate social difficulties.

- Being a loner
- Being the class clown
- Being too physical
- Being overbearing, wanting the last word
- Being over sensitive and easily hurt
- Being immature and seeking attention
- Preferring to spend time with people much younger or much older than peers

A lack of positive social experiences will leave the young person unsure how to engage with others, or not wanting to, and becoming increasingly less able to do so. Of course, such behaviour can be shown by any teenager, but where an unusual appearance is present, the problems are compounded.

1 LEARNING TO JOIN IN

Dealing with reactions to unusual appearance

People who have an illness, injury or condition that affects the way they look may feel more socially confident when they can:

- understand that everyone feels a bit curious, concerned and awkward when they see someone who looks unusual.
- learn and practise at least one strategy for use when someone stares or asks about their disfigurement.
- take the initiative in setting the tone or topic of subsequent conversation

All of these strategies take practice and require confidence and courage. See the *Guide on Having something to say*.

Awareness of others and self

Paying more attention to others – *being more curious* – can help to reduce feelings of being stared at. Create opportunities to discuss characters, e.g., in soaps or other TV dramas as aspects of others in the form or the year group. What is this person like? What makes them tick? Why do they get into the scrapes they get into? Why are they particularly liked and helped or disliked and obstructed? Extend your pupil's capacity for noticing and thinking his peers.

Then invite your pupil to ask these questions and make these observations of himself. Good social interactions with others depend upon a certain degree of self-awareness. Your student needs to know what kinds of things really interest him and what turns him off, what kinds of activities and people he is drawn to, and what he might rather avoid.

Teach key social skills

For various reasons a young person with a disfigurement, particularly where the face is affected, may develop a social style which is defensive or avoidant and which others experience as quite withdrawn or stand-offish. Observe how the student you are supporting behaves among classmates and others, and be prepared to address the following points to improve his ability to engage with others socially.

- Greeting people by name with eye contact
- Using people's names more
- Smiling more and making eye contact
- Asking to join in an activity that others are already playing
- Asking someone else if they would like some help
- Suggesting a game or activity
- Start a new conversation, or change the subject with a question

Each of these new skills can be practised with an adult, learning new forms of words and actions before using them in a practical situation. This learning process requires courage and patience.

Create social opportunities

A young person who is lacking the confidence to approach other people will feel even more inadequate if you insist on him making an attempt. It is preferable, especially at first, to look for situations in which the practical opportunities that exist in the school can be used to help the student try out new kinds of interactions with others.

- Join a team painting scenery for the school play
- With a partner, distribute the school registers every morning
- Work in a group to prepare and run a cake stall during Charity Week

Address difficult social situations

The action chart on page 3 shows how a pupil was helped to –

- review the week at school and anticipate particular instances of social difficulty
- devise and outline new approaches which would be worth trying
- plan a specific occasion and try out the new approach
- evaluate how it went.

Social skills planner/log

Hard situation	What I could try?	Dates of attempts	How did it go?
Science lessons with Mr Khan - when we do an experiment in pairs.	Don't hang about worrying - go and ask someone to be my partner (eg Ollie Smith who has an Ipswich Town pencil case)	3.10.02 I asked Ollie We had to test what dissolved and what didn't	Ollie is worried about not getting back into the Premiership. So am I. He's never been to a match. The experiment was okay too.
New neighbours at home - moved in last month. Two children, girl and boy, I don't know their names	When they go out the front and play on their bikes I could take my skateboard out, say Hi I'm Ben, Don't mind my nose and my voice and stuff, it's just the way it is. What are your names?	13 Oct	Very scary. They looked at each other and giggled. I said, "Come on, you must <i>have</i> names." I nearly got cross but it came out all right. Piers and Emily. They're twins.
At lunch time - in the hall which is crowded and noisy and horrible.	Look for a space next someone who's sitting on their own and get talking to them. Eg What form are you in? Have you ever had school meals or always packed lunches? Who do you think will win the world cup?	15 Oct	It was really interesting. I met this boy called Mark who only had crisps and bars and stuff. He said he wished his mum would make him sandwiches. I swapped half mine for some of his crisps. I asked him what he eats in the evening - frozen pizza is his favourite. He asked what happened to my nose etc so I told him about my cleft also about the actor in <i>Gladiator</i> who has a cleft. Two of his friends joined in and he introduced me. They're all in 8K4, Steve and Darren. We mostly talked about food. I hardly noticed how noisy and dreadful the hall is.

