

3 – 6 years. Supporting a child with a disfigurement: a teacher's guide

Guide 12. Moving on to junior school

When it is time to progress to junior school, a child who has a disfigurement has usually attended infant school long enough for everyone to have become quite used to her unusual appearance. This is in general very positive for the child, enabling her to enjoy good social interactions with the staff and children she meets every day.

At the new school there will be many children and staff who have not met this child before and will be quite unfamiliar with the way she looks.

In addition to all the usual concerns about starting at a new school, the child's parents are likely to have specific anxieties about how their child will be accepted among so many new people. From being out and about with her in various situations where there are other people, the family will know that entering any new situation involves exposing their child to scrutiny, curiosity, questions, and comments.

Alongside all the usual meetings and visits which precede the children's move to their new school, two specific kinds of additional preparations will be needed

- The staff at the new school will need to prepare for pupils' reactions of staring, curiosity and concern to the new pupil's appearance.
- The child herself will need some preparation to for the challenge of meeting lots of children, most of them older than herself, who have not seen her before.

Allow plenty of time for these preparations – begin them well before the first visit the children make to their new school.

If there is a delay in establishing which pupils will be attending which schools (if a school is oversubscribed for instance) staff preparations will be delayed. But it will still be possible to work with the child so that she can learn and practise skills and strategies for managing other people's reactions to her unusual appearance.

1 WORKING WITH THE CHILD WHO IS MOVING ON

A child who has a condition, injury or illness that affects her appearance will get on much better if she has –

- a basic understanding of why people react as they do to her unusual appearance
- at least one strategy for dealing with curiosity in a positive way
- some social skills for talking about herself and asking other children about themselves.

Observe how she manages when she encounters children and adults she has not met before. Usually this can be done when you take a group of the children on a trip or visit. Ideally, there will be other groups of children there, e.g. a pantomime or music show at a nearby school or a special fun day for children at a local park or leisure centre.

- How does she seem in unfamiliar surroundings? Is she nervous or confident?
- How do other people seem when they notice her? For example, do you see any children notice and then draw their friends' attention to her? (This is quite a common response when groups of children see someone they haven't met before who has a facial disfigurement.)
- Does she stay close to the children she already knows well, or does she engage with or speak to anyone new to her?
- Is she over-friendly to strangers?

Working with the parents

It will also be important to ask the parents how they and their child get on when they encounter new people.

- Do they have established strategies for coping with reactions?
- What do they say if anyone makes a comment or asks a question?
- What would they like to say in such situations?
- What sort of words do they prefer when they discuss their child's visible difference? Would they like help in dealing with the reactions from parents of other children at the new school?

Explain to the parents that you are planning to teach their child to respond with confidence when other children at the new school, many of them older, are curious about the way she looks. Parents may feel less worried if they are involved with these preparations.

Preparing the child

Here are some points to help ensure the child is well prepared for meeting new people at junior school:

- How aware is the child of other people's reactions? Does she know that most people will not have seen anyone before who has the condition, injury or illness that affects the way she looks? How does this affect her?
- Does she have any ideas of her own about what she might like to say when children at the new school stare or ask her questions about her appearance?
- Is she happy to answer questions?
- When people ask, what does she say? (For more about learning this essential social skill, see the *Guide on Having something to say*.)
- How comfortable / uncomfortable is she with this?
- Would she like help to work out some answers, and opportunities to practise?
- Can she talk in more detail about her facial difference? (for example, when getting to know another child better and becoming friends.)

- How comfortable / uncomfortable is she with this?
- Would she like some help with saying a bit more about her disfigurement and some of the experiences she has had?
- Can she talk about other aspects of herself too – family and pets, likes and dislikes, what she enjoys doing at the weekends...
- Can she ask other people about themselves and get to know them?
- Would she like help with this and opportunities to practise these important social skills?

Some of the points on this checklist will be useful for all the children moving on to their new school. For more information about getting on well with other children, see the *Guide on Practical support with social skills*.

2 WORKING WITH STAFF AT THE NEW SCHOOL

Because disfigurement is relatively rare, most teachers, particularly in smaller schools, have little experience of supporting a child who looks different. They will need to know:

- Reactions such as curiosity, concern and looking or staring are quite usual.
- The best way to manage other children's (and adults') looks and stares is to say something very brief about the disfigurement and then move the subject on to something else. (See the *Guide on Having something to say*.)
- The quality of the child's social interactions will have an impact on her self-esteem and consequently on school experiences and outcomes longer-term.
- The Disability Discrimination Act, through various Codes of Practice and other documents establishes disfigurement as a disability and requires schools to anticipate and make adjustments so that a pupil or prospective pupil with a disfigurement will not experience less favourable treatment (see the *Introduction to these Guides*).
- The special social and psychological issues associated with disfigurement should be understood and addressed whether or not the child has a statement of special educational needs or sees herself as having a disability.

Education professionals sometimes express their inclusive intentions by saying "He will be treated the same as everyone else" or "All our children are special" or other similar statements that endorse inclusion. But good intentions and inclusion policies require preparation and action.

It is essential to avoid a situation where the child visits or starts at his new school, all the other pupils turn to look at whatever it is about her appearance that is different, and staff have not been prepared and do not know how to respond to this. It will be very helpful if staff at the new school obtain a copy of *Supporting a child with a disfigurement: a teacher's guide* for the 7-11 age group from *Changing Faces*.