

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

Guide 7. Practical support with social skills

David - a case study

David was almost four years old when he started nursery. He was a very shy boy and avoided looking directly at other children or at unfamiliar adults. David had been born with an extensive cleft lip and palate. Surgical repair was performed when he was an infant but further treatment would be needed. David never approached anyone directly, or spoke to them. The staff noticed that he was really interested in the climbing frame. He would stand beside it and watch other children playing but would not respond to encouragement to join in. The staff drew some playground games in chalk and showed him how to walk along a line, following another child. The chalk lines grew more elaborate and interesting and other children joined in. The staff drew lines that ran towards the climbing frame. Then, one day, David followed another boy along a low beam. He had learned the rules of following and joining in with the ways that other children play.

A child who looks unusual may sometimes seem unsociable. Observe how the child behaves in different situations:

- Playing alone or wandering away from others
- Seeking attention - interrupting
- Being too physical
- Being overbearing, ignoring the needs of others
- Being over sensitive and easily hurt
- Preferring to be with children younger or older than himself, or with adults

A lack of positive social experiences will leave the child unsure how to engage with others, or not wanting to, and becoming increasingly less able to join in. Early years staff need to provide carefully measured tasks and activities so that the child can begin to join in. At the same time staff need to help the child to gain understanding and skills so that he can manage these new social interactions.

1 HELPING A CHILD TO JOIN IN

Awareness of others and self

Learning to pay more attention to others, noticing what they look like and what they do, can help a child who looks different to be more tolerant of receiving attention.

“What can you see?” One child has curly hair, another a yellow anorak. Different classmates at different times may look happy, busy, tired, quiet, bored, grumpy, shy, thoughtful... Help the child to notice how others look and how they are behaving.

“What do the others like to do?” Play games where the children take turns to name their favourite colours, their favourite fruits, their favourite television programmes... This can help the child to see himself as others see him – a child who has a pet rabbit and likes to help grandad in the garden.

Paying attention to each other and finding out more about each other is very important when a child has become accustomed to being separate and alone.

Modelling having a turn

At this stage of their development, children often play alongside each other rather than directly engaging with each other.

A child who is lacking the confidence to approach others will feel even more inadequate if you insist on him making an attempt. By using an activity that particularly engages a child, you can help him to interact with others and communicate a wish to have a go.

EXAMPLE: when children play with water, you could ask the child a question that will lead him to look at what the other children are doing together.

“Who has got the water wheel?”

Then you could extend the interaction with a prompt.

“Shall we ask Tom to let you have a turn?”

Make sure that you give the child time to make a request for himself. Encourage him to look at the faces of other children to gauge their reactions.

“Is he going to let you have a go?”

Then, model the question to Tom.

Finally, model the thanks to Tom.

The aim is to encourage the child towards self-reliance, so you need to be careful that you talk alongside the child and not for him.

Encourage other children to ask questions and to look for a response. In this way the child will gain confidence in looking at people and understanding their intentions.

Useful social strategies

There are some key social skills which children need if they have a condition, injury or illness that affects the way they look, so that they are able to respond well to other children’s curiosity. See the *Guide on Having something to say*. More general social skills are also very important and a child who looks different may have some catching up to do.

- Greeting people by name with eye contact

- Using people's names
- Smiling more and making eye contact
- Asking to join in a game that others are already playing
- Asking someone else if they would like to join in with what you are doing
- Suggesting a game or activity
- Starting a new conversation, or changing the subject with a question.

Each of these new skills can be practised with an adult, using role-play or playing with puppets, for example, to learn new forms of words and actions before using them in a practical situation. Remember to reinforce the idea that having a go is more important than total success.

You will need to observe how the child gets on during playtimes. As well as eye contact, voice and body language are important. Is the child too loud or too quiet? Do they 'look' aggressive or timid? Even quite young children can be surprisingly sensitive to these social signs. For more about non-verbal communication see the *Guide on Self-expression*.