

7-11 years. Supporting a child with a disfigurement: a teacher's guide

## Guide 6. Developing self-esteem

Self-esteem is closely linked to experiencing plenty of good social interactions. Children with disfigurements often struggle to achieve a good and enjoyable social flow. Consequently, they often have low self-esteem. This makes it harder for them to gain as much as they should from school, both socially and educationally.

A pupil who has low self-esteem will tend to behave in ways which are meant to make them feel less worthless. But these defensive behaviours make it even harder to have good social interactions. The child gets into a vicious circle – difficult behaviour leading to negative responses from others leading to lowered self-esteem leading to more difficult behaviour and so on.

### 1 IDENTIFYING LOW SELF ESTEEM

By careful observation you will be able to identify behaviours which are associated with lowered self-esteem. Here are some examples:

<b>Quitting</b>	Switching from one activity to another with little engagement in any task.
<b>Avoidance</b>	Opting out before even starting a task or activity. May give reasons such as “boring” or “done it before.”
<b>Cheating</b>	Altering the rules – explicitly or privately. May appear ‘sneaky’.
<b>Clowning</b>	Using loud, silly or cute behaviour - often to ‘seek’ attention which otherwise goes to unusual appearance, poor schoolwork etc.
<b>Controlling</b>	Attempting to ‘take over’ a game or activity and organise or boss other children (or adults). Can include trying to ‘control’ knowledge – a ‘know-all’.
<b>Aggression, name calling, bullying</b>	Rough, hurtful or dominant behaviour towards others.
<b>Passive aggressive</b>	Agrees or even offers to do something helpful but does not do it – ‘forgets’ or has something else more important.
<b>Blaming</b>	Citing other people, events or factors when anything goes wrong.
<b>Denying</b>	Usually to reduce the importance of something. “I didn’t want to play anyway.”
<b>Rationalising</b>	Making excuses for poor performance or mistakes rather than accepting responsibility.

All these behaviours originate in the pupil's attempt to manage a sense of being unacceptable or worthless. To onlookers they are clearly counterproductive and will not help him achieve better social interactions or greater acceptance by others. But from the child's viewpoint, this difficult behaviour may be the only thing he can come up with to try and disguise or remove his dreadful sense of weakness, failure, worthlessness etc.

## 2 STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING LOWERED SELF-ESTEEM

Low self-esteem tends to be further lowered by attempting to correct the negative behaviour. It is defensive behaviour and in a sense the child is unconsciously compelled to do it by feelings of worthlessness.

The best way forward is to build self-esteem from the inside by increasing the child's experience of positive moments during the school day. This means creating more opportunities for positive social interaction and achievement, and reducing the amount of energy and attention which may fuel the difficult behaviours.

- Involve parents in strategies to improve self-esteem. Consistency between home and school is important.
- Work together with colleagues: teachers, support assistants, and learning mentors to ensure consistency within school.
- Agree a programme, which may include an IEP, which is understood by and involves everyone.
- Set achievable targets and a time for regular review of progress.

### Pre-empt the negative and appreciate the positive

Draw the pupil away from difficult behaviour as soon as you see it coming. This requires both vigilance and sensitivity to notice as soon as a child is going off task and then handle it gently. "Sean, how are you getting on?" will let him know you're there and will work better than the "Stop that Sean. Stop that now!" which you might need a moment later.

Recognise and appreciate positive behaviour with a quiet comment to the pupil. "Thank you for wiping that table, Sean, that's helpful." Keep this low-key – a pupil with low self-esteem may feel patronised by praise or may not believe you.

### Improve social skills

Strategies for addressing your pupil's lowered self-esteem need to run parallel with the development of more and better social interactions. Assess whether the social skills are there but are not being used, or whether the pupil you are supporting has a real gap in his ability to relate to other children. When a child has a disfigurement difficulties can arise through underdeveloped skills in 'reading' how others are feeling and in expressing one's own feelings appropriately. If this seems to be the case, please see the *Guides* on *Practical support with social skills*, and *Self-expression*. Most children show improvement in social and language skills as their self-esteem improves.

## Mistakes are allowed

You and your colleagues can model responses to making mistakes which do not involve criticism and blame. Mistakes can be seen as helpful – they can help us notice what we're doing.

EXAMPLE: “Whoops. I think maybe I was trying to go too fast. There's plenty of time.”  
“Oh dear. I seem to have left the book I wanted in the staff-room. I'll have to go back and get it.”

## Create opportunities to do well

Find one thing that the pupil is good at and make it a basis for successful outcomes. Everyone has his own strengths or talents – this pupil needs to know he is no exception.

If he can shine in music, drawing or solving maths problems, try planning some activities where he can work with a few other children or just one other child and then demonstrate to the class what has been achieved.

Pitch tasks and activities so that the pupil can see a real possibility of achieving something. When self-esteem improves he will be able to attempt more challenging activities which at present may cause him to flip into defensive negative behaviour.

Some children with a disfiguring condition, injury or illness, may have some sensory or motor impairment. Ask for assessment and advice from specialist teachers in order to make tasks and activities accessible and to minimise frustration and boredom.

## Invite choice

Encourage the pupil to make his own choices. A choice which may seem trivial to you can help a child to experience some real control in his life. Look out for opportunities to choose and regularly offer the pupil two clear options:

- Would he like to work with a pen or with a pencil?
- Would he prefer to work in his exercise book or on separate paper?
- Does he want to wear a coat or not at playtime?
- Can he help to clear up by going around with the waste paper basket for everyone to put their scraps in or by collecting the scissors and glue from the tables?

## Create social opportunities

Social tasks and activities can be introduced when the child is beginning to be more settled. At first, involve an adult such as an LSA or learning mentor to pre-empt any difficulties that might arise and to help all the children gain awareness of what helps things to go well, e.g. “Jamie, that's a good speed to read the measurements. It means the others have got time to write them down.”

Look for activities that give the pupil a real reason to be part of a team, e.g., tidying the PE cupboard, watering the plants. Vary the groups and the activities. By sharing in the activity an adult helper can model getting on well with others: “Do you think we need to wash these footballs?” or “Who's going to fill the sink and who'll carry them over there?”