

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

Guide 8. Self-expression

Facial expressions are of great importance not only for communication among individuals but also because they embody our sense of self.

The experience of people with facial disfigurements of different kinds demonstrates the importance of facial embodiment to our emotional well being. It is through the face that our emotional sensibility is revealed to ourselves and others.

Children who can recognise facial expression accurately in others will more readily learn to recognise their own and others' feelings and respond appropriately.

Competence in understanding and managing these interactions is as important to a child's development as academic/cognitive progress.

1 FACIAL EXPRESSION AND FACIAL DISFIGUREMENT

Difficulties in developing skills of expression in self and in recognising others' expression can arise in different ways:

- Child habitually avoids the gaze of others – looks down or keeps face averted.
- Child's face cannot readily make the subtle movements involved in facial expression, usually because of unusual bone structure, paralysis, or lack of flexibility of skin or other tissue due to scarring for instance.
- Child has been encouraged to 'be brave' during painful medical procedures such as changing dressings on burns – lack of expression may have been rewarded.
- Others may simply not pay enough attention to what the child is trying to communicate – over-focusing on the disfigurement, failing to see the child more fully; or if they have been told not to stare, others may avoid looking at the child.

2 OBSERVING INTERACTIONS AND IDENTIFYING FEELINGS

It is easy to make assumptions about how much skill a child has developed in conveying, receiving and interpreting facial expressions. As a teacher, you are in a good position to make observations of the child in different situations to see if he can show expressions to convey pleasure, enthusiasm, reluctance, frustration, impatience, irritation, anger, happiness, delight, sadness, hurt, fear, anxiety. Can he convey these feelings to other children and to adults?

3 MODELLING SELF EXPRESSION

During general school activities, look for opportunities to model 'saying and showing' your own reactions to incidents, events and people. Children benefit from:

- having feelings named and acknowledged
- distinguishing between feelings, e.g., anger may be disappointment or irritation
- seeing feelings expressed and managed appropriately.

3 DEVELOPING EXPRESSIVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS

All children need opportunities to develop receptive and productive skills of self-expression and the language needed to describe their own understanding. The activities described below can be used with the whole class, with a group or one-to-one.

If you have a child with restricted or absent ability to make facial expressions, you will need to adapt your approach so that you focus on gesture, stance and body-language.

Verbal expression is important for all children, but is especially important for a child with restricted capacity for facial expression. Vocabulary, pitch, emphasis, tone and volume will all be important.

Imagining states of mind

Draw up a table listing events that affect us in column A. Ask the child you are working with one to one or your class to imagine the experience in column A. Then in column B list words to describe the feelings they might have.

A	B	C
scoring a goal at football	happy, triumphant	'high fives', thumbs up, arms up high with fists raised
sitting down to do a test	nervous, reluctant	twitchy fingers...
walking with a blister on your heel	hurt, wincing	
using a sharpener that keeps breaking your pencil	frustrated, irritated	
getting full marks in a test	proud, happy	

Finally, ask the child or children to demonstrate this feeling using face, arms, hands, etc. (but not voice!) Use column C to note the kind of non-verbal expression that conveys the feeling or state of mind in column B.

Use large and small versions of the same expression or movement and see how scale can affect the message conveyed.

Communicating without words

Children who are socially comfortable tend to have developed good communication skills and can understand what another person might be thinking or feeling.

As children grow and mature, social interactions become more complex and subtle, calling for more complex non-verbal (and verbal) communications:

- Facial expression
- Tone of voice
- Gesture
- Movement and stance

A display of photographs of people in magazines and newspapers can show how people communicate without words. Photographs illustrating sports or news stories or stills from films are often particularly varied in the range of expressions that they show.

1. Number the pictures to use the display for activities exploring non-verbal expression.
2. List words and phrases to describe the feelings portrayed.
3. Explore similar feelings originating in personal experiences.
4. Story line – specify certain pictures from the display and invite pupil(s) to create a story line so that the characters' experiences give rise to these expressions.
5. Role-play – as above but then mime the story and especially the expressions.
6. (If working in groups.) When the other groups watch the silent playlet, their task is to retell the story verbally, paying attention to how they knew what was going on with the different characters.
7. Repeat the mimed plays but 'freeze' the action at key points to discuss what is going on with the key characters.

Spoken language – identifying feeling

1. Tape a selection of short extracts from radio dramas and plays. With your class, focus on just one extract at a time and listen to it more than once.
2. Ask the class to name and list all the feelings or inner states that the characters are feeling
3. While listening, make a mind map of interactions and feelings between characters
4. Simulate the facial expression, gesture and body language of a character

Some children will enjoy making a short 'radio play' of their own – creating a story line, writing the script, rehearsing and acting into a microphone, using expressive voice tone to add atmosphere to the mini-drama.