

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

Guide 1. Starting secondary school

When preparing for the arrival of a young person who has an unusual appearance, all staff will need information about how looking different affects both adults and children. You will need some practical 'do's and don'ts' for dealing with reactions such as staring, comments and asking questions. Ideally these preparations should be undertaken well before the new pupil joins your school.

It usually works best if a named member of staff, e.g., year head, or possibly SENCO, oversees the transition – information gathering, information sharing with colleagues and maintaining a good open communication channel with the prospective new pupil and the parents.

The new pupil will probably have had a settled period in junior school where everyone has become used to the way he looks. The staff there will be an important source of information about how he has managed and how the new challenges can be approached most effectively.

At an early stage, arrange a meeting with your prospective new pupil and his family. See the *Guide on Working with parents and siblings*. Ask what the family call the condition, injury or illness that affects the way their child looks and how they describe it. Also find out how the young person talks about it?

Families manage other people's reactions in very different ways:

- giving positive answers to other people's questions
- reacting with hostility to strangers' reactions to their child's disfigured appearance
- responding with humour to diffuse strangers' uneasiness about disfigurement
- ignoring the unwanted attention their child receives
- avoiding staring and curiosity by avoiding things like shopping, using the leisure centre or swimming pool.
- using different approaches at different times

You need to ask the parents and the young person how they deal with other people's reactions to the way their child looks and how they manage when encountering new people.

It is also important to make contact at an early stage with other professionals who may be involved. Request and read all the assessments and reports about this new pupil to help you identify and meet any needs he may have, and ensure good ongoing support. Also, if difficulties do arise at a later stage, you will be well placed to share your concerns and seek additional input if required. See the *Guide on Working collaboratively with other professionals*.

1 LOOKING AT YOUR OWN FEELINGS AND BELIEFS

Anyone encountering a person who has a disfigurement can experience many different reactions. This is especially so when it is a young person who has a condition, injury or illness which affects the way they look. However, with all the demands teachers meet

every day, you may not have time to pause and fully register your own reactions when you first meet your new pupil whose appearance is unusual.

Find time to check yourself out before the new pupil arrives. You may feel embarrassed, shocked, upset, angry, vulnerable, repulsed, or touched with pity by what has happened to this young person. Recognising your own feelings and beliefs about appearance and disfigurement will help you to support the student better.

...about appearance

How important is appearance for you? What does a person's outward appearance say about them? How are you affected by people's appearance?

Try and notice other aspects of people as well as their physical appearance. What about their character, their attitudes, energy, sensitivity, imagination or humour? What aspects of other people do you tend to notice first?

...about disfigurement

What are your assumptions or beliefs about disfigurement? Throughout history and across many cultures, beauty has often been linked to goodness, virtue and happy endings, ugliness to badness, sin and punishment. What do *you* think? What are your hopes and fears for this young person, both now and in the future?

There are in fact many people with disfigurements leading full lives, with careers, families, and all the usual ups and downs. They have developed the social skills and strategies, and built up the self-esteem to respond effectively each time they encounter someone who stares or doesn't know where to look.

2 LOOKING AND BEING LOOKED AT

Children, teenagers and adults who look different all experience staring, questions and comments, especially from people who haven't met them before. Your new pupil will have had experience of furtive glances, unabashed staring, questions and comments both well-meant and blatantly rude. Most of us find it unpleasant to be stared at or pestered with questions, for whatever reason. But when someone joins your school who has a condition, injury or illness that affects the way they look, it is going to be important to handle other people's reactions positively.

It is important not to prohibit staring and curiosity. Making friends begins with looking and being looked at. The other young people are likely to look carefully, perhaps with surprise and interest. They may ask questions – of the newcomer himself, of a classmate, or, occasionally, of a familiar member of staff. If these expressions of interest are discouraged the pupil who looks different is at risk of finding it harder to make friends.

3 LINKING WITH PREVIOUS TEACHERS WHO KNOW THE CHILD

Arrange to observe your prospective new pupil in his current class *and at breaktime*. Talk to his current teacher about how he experiences school, including the social environment

school provides. The focus of any information about your new pupil's disfigurement needs to be *the young person* rather than the disfigurement:

- Who is this child? What has happened to his face (or hands etc)?
- How does this affect him? (Speech? Breathing? Swallowing? Hearing? Sight? Sensitivity to heat or cold? Fine motor skills?)
- How does he manage?
- Is his condition stable or will it / could it alter? If so, would the alteration be gradual or sudden?
- Does he have any ongoing treatment, or is any medical treatment planned?
- How is school attendance affected (or may be affected in future?)
- What about his personality, strengths and abilities? What resources does he himself bring to the challenge of disfigurement?
- How well does he engage socially with other young people?... and with adults he knows well?
- How does he respond when people he does not know well look at him and comment or ask a question? Does he have an effective answer of his own? ...Sometimes? Always?
- What form of words has been used by staff to respond to other people's expressions of curiosity or concern?

This information will help you prepare effectively for the new pupil's visits to your school and for his eventual start with you.

4 PREPARING STAFF FOR THE NEW CHALLENGE

All the staff at your school will have an important part to play in ensuring that everyone becomes comfortable and confident about disfigurement.

Sharing information

...about the new pupil

Carefully plan a brief information session, perhaps as part of a more general staff meeting, before the new pupil makes his first visit from the feeder school. From your meeting with parents, your observations of the pupil in his current school, and your discussions with his current teacher and other professionals involved, you will have information about both the young person and the condition, injury or illness that affects the way he looks. Prepare information for colleagues in collaboration with the prospective pupil himself and with his parents, using words acceptable to them, so that no information is passed on without their full consent.

Through your usual pre-admission meeting(s) with the new pupil and your skills of observation and assessment, you will also have information for colleagues concerning this new child's development, strengths and needs, both educationally and socially (as for any new pupil joining your school).

...about the social psychology of appearance and disfigurement

You will need to help colleagues develop an additional awareness and understanding of the issues associated with disfigurement. It is essential to deal positively with other

people's reactions to a person who looks different. See section 2 above – *Looking and being looked at*.

The new pupil's social, psychological and educational development will be affected (and may well already have been affected) by his experience of staring, comments and questions. He is now going to have to face everyone at his new school – yourself, your colleagues and all the other pupils, most of them older than himself.

All staff will need to be able to deal simply and effectively with curiosity and comments which other pupils may express within their hearing, or may communicate non-verbally by looking too long or askance, staring or other reactions.

This can be achieved by:

- explaining the main issues around disfigurement as set out in this *Guide*, perhaps as part of a staff meeting.
- at the same time providing all staff with a brief information sheet which sets out what to say. To prepare this, discuss with the pupil, the parents and the primary school teachers, what kind of answer he would like to give to anyone asking about his unusual appearance. Agree a form of words which the pupil is comfortable with for responding to surprise, curiosity etc. See the example below and see also the *Guide* on *Having something to say*.

EXAMPLE:

Guidance for all staff

If you see a pupil staring at Joel or overhear pupils commenting or asking each other about Joel, this is what to say:

“You seem to have noticed Joel. He was in a fire but he’s fine now.

If a pupil asks you about Joel's unusual appearance:

“Yes, Joel was in a fire but he’s fine now....

Then follow on with something else to move the conversation on in a natural and appropriate way eg

.....You’re all new and you’ve got a space on your table. You look a cool bunch - why not invite him over and introduce yourselves.

.....You’ll be fine too if you can just get these diagrams finished before the bell.

.....Have you got time to earn yourself some credit and help me cart this kit upstairs?

Joel will give similar answers if anyone asks him directly.

In this way staff can help establish the fact that some people have an injury, illness or condition that affects the way they look, and that we can all be comfortable with this.

If other pupils' attention to the new pupil seems less curious and more menacing, please see the *Guide on Teasing, name-calling and bullying*.

You should not allow a situation to arise where the new pupil visits the school from his junior school, or joins as a new pupil and becomes the object of curiosity because staff have not been prepared and trained in handling people's reactions. Handling it well will help to ensure that the new pupil can enter this new stage of his education safely and comfortably, so as to enjoy and achieve both educationally and socially.

...about common pitfalls

As well as issues around staring and questions, there are some other well-intentioned interventions which need to be carefully checked.

- It can seem helpful to say that a pupil is "...just the same as everyone else," perhaps meaning that he or she needs the same learning and social experiences as everyone else. However, you risk losing credibility with both students and staff, who can all see that something has happened to make this pupil look different.
- "It's the inside that counts" is another well-meant attempt to smooth the path for a pupil with a disfigurement. Of course the inside counts, but the outside, the way we look, counts too – especially among young people in their teens. If you avoid referring to appearance you may create problems for the future.
- TV and magazines emphasise appearance, but even so, it is profoundly human to notice other people's appearance and differences, especially faces. People who look different have to work *with this*, they cannot pretend it isn't so.
- The young person who looks different will know that he is being noticed all the time, and yet no one ever says a word about it. You risk undermining his experience if his appearance is not to be mentioned.
- The pupil concerned may at times be worried or thoughtful about what has happened to him or how he looks. If you and other adults make a rule that appearance is not to be spoken of, it will discourage him from talking to anyone about this.
- On television and in books, characters are sometimes described and perhaps judged in terms of their appearance. If the pupils have been discouraged from talking about appearance and difference, the fictional book or film may become a substitute reality for them.