

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

Guide 12. Transfer to secondary school

When a pupil has a disfigurement, the transition to secondary school is often a particularly anxious time for both child and parents. In most cases he will be leaving a relatively small school where everyone knows everyone else, and arriving in a much larger school with huge numbers of older children and teachers.

In addition to all the usual concerns about starting secondary school, there will be specific anxieties about staring, comments and questions among so many new people. From being out and about in various situations among unfamiliar people, the child and his family will know that entering any new situation involves exposure and scrutiny.

If the pupil has made good friends at junior school, there will be worries about retaining these friendships as well as about making new friends at the new school. Alternatively, if the pupil feels isolated at junior school, the new school may be seen as an opportunity to make a fresh start – with the underlying fear that things will still not go well socially.

These fears and anxieties are quite valid. Older children tend to be less accepting and more judgemental.¹ Older children are more likely both to feel and to express dislike of a child with a facial disfigurement. Children and teenagers with facial disfigurement tend to have fewer friends – decreasing with age.² People with facial disfigurement who cope well are very clear that friends as well as family are important factors in their resilience.³ If the transition to secondary school includes loss of friends and/or a failure to make new friends, positive outcomes long-term are put at risk.

Alongside all the usual meetings and visits which precede the children's move to their new school(s), 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 about the new pupil's appearance so that they can respond in ways which are socially positive for everyone.
- The pupil himself will need some preparation to for the challenge of meeting new young people, most of them older than himself, who have not seen him before.

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

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

¹ Richardson (1970) quoted in Bull, R. & Rumsey, N. (1988) *The Social Psychology of Facial Appearance*, Springer-Verlag, New York Inc.

² Several studies summarised in Kish, V. and Lansdown, R. (2000) in Frances, J. (2004) *Educating Children with Facial Disfigurement – Creating Inclusive School Communities*, RoutledgeFalmer, London p68.

³ Coles-Gale, B. (2001) in Frances, J. (2004) (op. cit.)

1 PREPARING THE PUPIL FOR SECONDARY SCHOOL

A child who has a disfigurement will get on much better if he has:

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

Observe how he manages when he encounters children and adults he has not met before. Usually this can be done when you take a group on a trip or visit. Ideally, there will be other groups of pupils there too, e.g., a play or music show at a nearby school, a visit to a museum or exhibition, or an event at a local leisure centre.

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

Use this checklist to work with your pupil in preparing for meeting new people at secondary school:

1. How aware is the child of other people's reactions? Is he aware that most people will not have seen anyone before who has the condition, injury or illness that affects the way he looks? What does he think about this?
2. Does he have any ideas of his own about what he might like to say when students at the new school stare or ask questions about his appearance?
3. Is he happy to answer questions?
4. When people ask, what does he say? (For more about learning this essential social skill, see the *Guide on Having something to say*.) How comfortable / uncomfortable is he with this?
5. Would he like help to work out some answers, and opportunities to practise?
6. Can he talk in more detail about his facial difference? (for example, when getting to know another pupil better and becoming friends.) How comfortable / uncomfortable is he with this?
7. Would he like some help with saying a bit more about his disfigurement and some of the experiences he has had?
8. Can he talk about other aspects of himself too – music or sport or other interests and enthusiasms, likes and dislikes, what he enjoys doing at the weekends...

9. Can he ask other people about themselves and get to know them?
10. Would he like help with this and opportunities to practise his social skills?

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

2 WORKING TOGETHER WITH YOUR PUPIL'S 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 reactions from parents of other children at the new school such as comments, questions or just staring?

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 his appearance. Parents may feel less worried if they are involved with this preparation.

3 WORKING WITH STAFF AT THE NEW SCHOOL

Because disfigurement is relatively rare, most teachers will have had little experience of teaching a pupil 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 looks and stares is to say something very brief about the disfigurement and then move on. (See the *Guide on Having something to say*.)
- the quality of the pupil's social interactions will have an impact on his 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 pupil has a statement of special educational needs or sees himself as having a disability.

Education professionals often express their inclusive intentions through statements about treating all pupils the same or ensuring equal access to the curriculum and other activities in school. But good intentions and inclusion policies require preparation and action.

It is essential to avoid a situation where a pupil visits or starts at his new school, all the other pupils turn to look at whatever it is about his appearance that is different, and staff have not been prepared and do not know how to respond.

Staff at the new school should ideally obtain a set of *Teacher's Guides 11-16 years*, which begins with *Starting secondary school*.