

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

## Guide 7. Practical support with social skills

### ***Katy – a case study***

Katy lacked confidence and had a general air of reluctance, apparently through feeling uncomfortable about the burn scars on her face. She mostly looked down or turned away and often put her hand over as much of the scarring as it would cover. She found it difficult to join in and other children tended not to include her. Katy appeared to be increasingly lost and lonely in a world of her own.

The teacher set Katy the task of helping a work experience student to learn everyone's name. Katy was drawn into showing interest in other children, making introductions and giving information to the student.

The teacher and classroom assistants encouraged the children to take turns playing games, in the class room and at break times. The games helped Katy to concentrate on watching and listening and responding to others.

A series of drama lessons helped the children to recognise and describe feelings in themselves and others, and Katy came to understand that the other children would be friendly when she showed them how lively and interested she could be.

A child with a disfigurement may sometimes seem to be struggling socially. Different behaviours may demonstrate social difficulties.

- Being a loner
- Being the class clown
- Being too physical
- Being overbearing, wanting the last word
- Being over sensitive and easily hurt
- Being immature and seeking attention

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 do so. Of course, such behaviours may be shown by any child, but where an unusual appearance is present, the problems are compounded.

### **1 HELPING A CHILD TO JOIN IN**

#### **Awareness of others and self**

Paying more attention to other people and noticing their individual characteristics, can help to reduce the child's feelings of being stared at. Extend your pupil's capacity to

notice how others are behaving by asking her particular questions. This will also help her to appreciate the varied interests of different people including the things they do alone or together:

“What can you see?”

Other people may look bright and cheerful, energetic, tired, quiet but interested, bored, grumpy, nervous, polite...

“What do the others like to do?”

They may like to play football, sit and read, dance, draw pictures, use a computer, or just chat together.

Help the pupil you are supporting to explore these aspects of herself too. What kinds of things interest her? Is there a game or other activity that she might like to join in sometimes? Help her to see herself as others see her, for example, as someone who is shy and quiet but who likes to laugh, as someone who is good at tidying up.

## **Gaining social confidence through shared activities**

A child who is lacking the confidence to approach other people will feel even more inadequate if you insist on her making an attempt.

It is preferable to look for situations in the classroom, and then elsewhere in the school, which can be used to help the child try out new activities jointly with other children.

- Helping to set out materials for a classroom activity or helping to clear away afterwards
- Putting away small apparatus used at playtime
- Running a fundraising stall during charity week.

This sort of confidence building work needs to take place over quite a long time.

## **Key social skills**

Introduce the pupil you are supporting to one or two of the social skills listed below. How many times can she notice other children doing these things?

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

When the child is ready, decide which skills to try first and agree a target for a week to start with. Arrange for someone to check in with the child throughout the week so that she can report successes or discuss difficulties.

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? For more about non-verbal communication see the *Guide on Self-expression*.

## Circle of Friends

Circle of Friends is an approach to helping a child to develop social skills through the support of the peer group. Six children from the class are nominated by the class teacher to receive training – usually from a behaviour specialist teacher or possibly an educational psychologist. For a fixed period of time, the Circle of Friends takes turns in looking out for the targeted child. They help to negotiate tricky situations. They are trained to seek the help of an adult when necessary.

The support is given to help a child engage with others in ordinary activities, such as putting work away, collecting lunch boxes and queuing for the dining area, working in a group to build a model.

This approach can be useful socially to ensure:

- active support from other children
- explicit and detailed plans for activities
- models of interaction for the child to follow
- positive feedback from peers.