

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

## Guide 12. Preparing for college, training or work

For a student with an unusual or noticeable appearance, specific preparations are important at every stage of the transition towards college or work:

- Thinking about careers – dreams, ideas and obstacles
- Application forms, letters and CVs – whether to mention the disfigurement
- Interviews – what about other people's reactions
- Starting somewhere completely new – new people's reactions to difference

The issues which need to be considered fall into three categories –

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|-----------------------------|--|
| <b>Ideas</b>                | Ensuring that ideas, plans and decisions are shaped by preferences, abilities and readiness to continue training and learning, not by notions of 'appropriateness' which sometimes arise around disfigurement. |
| <b>What to say and when</b> | Does mentioning disfigurement in your application, increase or decrease the chances of being short listed?   |
| <b>New people</b>           | Managing reactions and getting to know a whole range of new people in a completely different social environment.   |

### 1 THINKING ABOUT CAREERS

In the past, careers and employment prospects of people with disfigurements have tended to be shaped by:

- lack of 'role models' already established in a wide range of jobs and careers
- other people's desire to protect them from hurt or disappointment
- employers' desire to 'protect' customers from concern or discomfort
- ideas about what is appropriate for people who look different
- employers' prejudicial judgements based on appearance.

### Skills and goals

For the best outcomes beyond school, *all* pupils should:

- develop a clear and full appreciation of their abilities, aptitudes and preferences
- build up a record of skills and experience as these are gained
- fully explore ideas about what they want and need in life
- understand what difficulties may lie ahead

- develop a problem-solving approach to overcoming difficulties
- recognise the importance of good communication and social skills.

This is especially important for students with disfigurements. To help ensure that opportunities are not needlessly restricted, the Disability Discrimination Act establishes that colleges, trainers and employers are discriminating unlawfully if –

- the potential trainee, student or employee receives **less favourable treatment** than other applicants or recruits because of his or her disfigurement.
- if the educational, training or employing organisation has **failed to make a reasonable adjustment** to ensure that the applicant or recruit is not at a substantial disadvantage because of his or her disfigurement.

When recruiting a student, trainee or employee with a disfigurement, reasonable adjustments usually involve staff training, awareness and monitoring.

Whether choosing which work experience placement to apply for in Year 10, or which courses and jobs to focus on beyond formal schooling, *all* students should be guided by their ambitions and abilities and by their appetite and capacity for more study or training.

### **Case study**

Lucy's Nf caused a large neurofibroma on her face. When she joined the school all staff had Inset about difference and after some initial trouble with ostracism Lucy settled in well. For Year 10 work experience she applied for a kennels placement. After the interview the owner asked the school if he could have someone else. Instead, Lucy had three good weeks at the nursery unit at a school for children with severe learning difficulties.

In Year 11 Lucy missed all the deadlines for college courses applications. It was thought most unlikely that she would get good enough GCSEs to be able to join a BTec or A-level course in the school sixth form.

The Connexions officer spent time getting to know Lucy better –

(a) Lucy said she never wanted to have a family because she would never want anyone else to go through what she had been through.

(b) Apart from school and work experience, Lucy had not been anywhere without one of her parents.

(c) She hated the school bus journeys because of comments and ostracism (but had never told her parents or school staff about this).

(d) With her mother, she did voluntary work most weekends at a stray cats shelter, but there were no paid staff there.

(e) She did not want to go to college – not even for a look round – because of the buses and the crowds.

The school arranged for three sixth formers to befriend Lucy on the school bus, mornings and evenings, and also organised a mentor to work with her. Together, they looked at things it might be good to say when meeting new people and for dealing with unkind reactions or remarks (see the *Guide on Having something to say and Teasing, name-calling and bullying*). They practised these together and went out together on various errands out of school, including bus rides and cafes, so that Lucy could practise meeting new people and dealing positively with reactions to her appearance. The Connexions officer arranged mock interviews and Lucy was at last willing to go out unaccompanied.

Her third solo trip took her to the College of Agriculture and Horticulture, a longish bus-ride away, where she met with a member of staff from the Small Animals Department.

Feeling concerned that they hadn't picked up on Lucy's unhappiness, and that they had colluded with the kennels owner against Lucy's best interests, the school were looking into setting up a special Year 12 course for Lucy to give her time to continue the process of gaining skills and confidence for the outside world. But she surprised them by applying for the foundation course in small animals care at the Agricultural college, where she started the following September.

## 2 APPLICATION FORMS, LETTERS AND CVS

Application forms often have a section for any further information which might be relevant. Letters and CVs can be shaped to include something similar, according to the course or job being applied for. This is the place where your pupil should put something in about her disfigurement *if she thinks it is in her best interest to do so*. Encourage her to think very carefully about this. If work experience has a fairly formal application procedure this can be a helpful first practice.

Reasons to mention disfigurement might include:

- **to demonstrate a potential advantage over other candidates**  
e.g. *I have a large birthmark on the left side of my face. Because of my unusual appearance, I have learned how to take the initiative in social situations and put people at ease. I think my social skills make me very good at dealing with the public and, with my other qualifications, experience and interests make me an ideal candidate for this job.*
- **to inform people so that they do not react with undue surprise and awkwardness**  
e.g. *I have a condition called Moebius Syndrome which means I have no movement in my face. Some people find this disconcerting when they first meet me, for instance at a job interview, but they soon get used to me.*

Reasons not to mention disfigurement might include:

- to prevent a college or employer from choosing not to shortlist someone because they have a disfigurement (although such a decision would be unlawful)
- to be able to respond face-to-face to other people's reactions at interview
- because appearance is of no relevance to the course or job being applied for.

## 3 INTERVIEWS

### Preparing

Even though others may not consciously intend to treat a person differently or less favourably when they have a facial disfigurement, almost all people do, especially upon first meeting them.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Kleck and Strenta (1980) quoted in Bull, R. & Rumsey, N. (1988), *The Social Psychology of Facial Appearance*, Springer-Verlag, New York Inc.

Anyone involved in a selection process should be aware of the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act (see page 2 above). This applies whether meeting pupils ahead of work experience, or conducting mock interviews to help school leavers learn the ropes, or running a complex series of tests, group activities and interviews for recruitment into a large and prestigious organisation.

Although the legislation is there to level the playing field, an applicant who looks different should think carefully about –

- putting the interviewer(s) at ease by saying something brief about her unusual appearance. (See the *Guide on Having something to say.*)
- offering positive answers to all the questions that the interviewer could possibly ask, including potential questions about looking different.
- finding ways of mentioning things about herself which are important for the course or job, even if the interviewer does not ask. (The interviewer may be ‘thrown’ by meeting someone with a facial disfigurement.)
- giving relevant examples of experiences and achievements to add depth and colour to answers.

## First impressions

<b>Looking the part</b>	As for all candidates, clothes and grooming – self-presentation – is important.
<b>Starting well</b>	The calm, purposeful way candidates enters the interview, meet the interviewer’s eye, shake hands and sit down, will be crucial.
<b>Shaking hands</b>	If your pupil has an injury, illness or condition that affects her hands she should think about saying something about this before or during the handshake. “As you can see my skin is affected by psoriasis. It isn’t catching of course – just very dry. I’ve never let it hold me back at school and it won’t be a problem at college either.”
<b>Informal ‘chat’</b>	Candidates need to be ready with brief, friendly responses if the interviewer begins by ‘trying to put her at ease’, e.g. with a question or comment about the weather, say, or the journey.
<b>Eye-contact</b>	This is vital to help show enthusiasm and give a good impression. If more than one person conducts the interview, it important to make some eye-contact with all the people on the panel while answering and not just with the person who asked the question.

How is your student in these areas? Consider extra practice interviews with feedback and perhaps videoed practice with self-assessment.

## Talking about the disfigurement

On one level, how we look has nothing to do with our suitability for almost all jobs. On another level, none of us can help feeling curious and concerned when we first encounter someone who has a disfigurement.

The interviewer(s) may or may not ask about a candidate's disfigurement because –

- it has already been covered in the application form.
- he or she is clear that the way applicants look is irrelevant to the job or course in question, and is staying focused on skills, experience, interest and capacity for learning or training.
- he or she has not noticed - they may be new to interviewing and very nervous themselves.
- the interviewer fears it would be rude to mention it.
- he or she is familiar with disfigurement, e.g. has a family member with a disfiguring injury, illness or condition.

It can be useful to have something prepared to say about disfigurement - this creates the option of saying something during the interview depending how things seem to be going. Your student should prepare and practice aloud to check *tone* –

“I don't think my face is an issue. I find that people respond to my personality, so it has never been a problem.”

Spoken steadily and calmly, this can simply and effectively answer a question about whether having an unusual birthmark might affect their ability to do the job. But with even a slight emphasis on 'face' this same sentence starts to sound aggressive or defensive, and will have almost the opposite effect on the interviewer.

Other examples of positive statements about appearance –

“New people are sometimes surprised because of how I look, so I've learnt to take the initiative and say Hi, which really helps.”

“When you have an unusual appearance, people generally don't forget you, which I have often found useful.”

“I had a lot of surgery when I was younger but my health and school attendance have been very good since then.” (Some interviewers wrongly imagine that disfigurement and other disabilities 'cause' absence.)

## Using a Presentation Folder or Progress File

If well prepared, a progress file or a presentation folder can be used to help shift an interviewer's attention away from the candidate sitting there to be looked at, and towards her achievements and capabilities as a potential recruit. A 'practice run' is essential to make sure the folder works and that your pupil is comfortable and fluent when using it.

This medium can also be used to convey something positive about a disfigurement, such as an information sheet about the condition or injury that affects their appearance. Ideally, your pupil should include a photo of herself getting on with life in the ordinary way, or a certificate from a burns camp or even from *Changing Faces*, citing the positive qualities which they have shown.

## 4 MEETING NEW PEOPLE

Work experience is often the first situation in which a young person has to meet and engage with a range of completely new people outside of school. Make sure your student has at least two strategies for meeting new people. See the *Guide on Having something to say*.

Discuss with your student whether she would like to –

- say nothing about her appearance in advance and deal with other people's reactions face-to-face.
- prepare the people she will meet on work experience by asking someone (e.g., the boss or manager at the placement) to say something to the staff or by sending some information in which can be passed on.

E.g. 'Jo will be here next week, on work experience from the High School. She's had an operation which has left a scar on her face, but it's no problem at all. At the moment she's thinking about a career in accounting, so I guess she'll be interested on how our systems work and the spreadsheets and so on.'

Because meeting new people may be a particular issue, try to make a monitoring visit as soon as possible. During the visit, check whether your student feels able to deal with other people's reactions to her unusual appearance.

At each stage of the application process and especially upon entering a new social environment, whether work experience or college or job, it is important to review what went well, what felt comfortable, and what, if anything, might be worth trying differently next time. This will help your pupil to tackle career planning, applications, interviews and new starts in ways which feel positive and constructive.