

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

Guide 4. Working inclusively with groups

1 WORKING WITH APPEARANCE AND DIFFERENCE

During their teenage years, young people develop a greatly sharpened awareness of their own and others' appearance, and tend to make more judgements based on appearance. Appearance, style and fashion can seem to be of overwhelming importance and feeling that you do not look right is often a major source of anxiety, with consequences for self-esteem and school performance¹. It is important to include learning activities about appearance and difference in secondary education, even if you do not have a pupil with a disfigurement in your school at this time. Being able to relate to people who may look different is an important aspect of citizenship.

If a pupil who has a disfigured appearance is to join the school it may be thought that it will be helpful to talk to all the pupils about this – perhaps just before she joins the school, or before she returns after an injury or illness which has altered her appearance. However, even if the message aims to encourage pupils to behave inclusively and pleasantly, research has shown², surprisingly, that talking to a group of children about a child tends to *reduce* pupils' inclination to initiate social interactions, i.e., they are *less* likely to be sociable. Please refer to the *Guides on Starting secondary school* and *Having something to say* for more effective approaches to enabling a pupil who looks different to become part of an inclusive school community.

The lesson ideas set out here are designed to make it more comfortable to talk about the judgements we all, at times, make about our own and each others' appearance and to explore the social issues arising out of difference. This is an especially sensitive area for young people and the lessons should be run within an ethos which is safe, respectful and positive.

Lesson idea – 'Tooling up'

Aims:

- Bringing the making of judgements and the passing comments about aspects of other people's appearance out into the open.
- Adopting a sharing, supportive and problem-solving approach to the often isolating problem of being teased or got at about aspects of your appearance.
- Exploring and rehearsing some effective strategies for managing unkind comments and teasing about appearance.

¹ Lovegrove, E. (2002) *Adolescents, appearance and anti-bullying strategies*, PhD Thesis, University of the West of England, quoted in Frances, J. (2004) *Educating Children with Facial Disfigurement – Creating Inclusive School Communities*, RoutledgeFalmer, London, p3.

² Vandell, D.L. & George, L.B. (1981) *op. cit.* p36.

Preparation:

Familiarise yourself with the social or interpersonal ‘tools’ outlines below so that you can bring these to life for the pupils at the appropriate point of the lesson. All the tools can provide effective responses to verbal nastiness so when Person A makes an unpleasant comment to or within earshot of Person B, person B is going to learn to respond with a new ‘tool’. The tools are non-aggressive ways of dealing with unkind remarks, ‘clever dick’ questions or other verbal behaviour

Tool 1 – HUMOUR

Person B maintains an upbeat or cheerful air, perhaps self-mocking but not apologetic.

Person A says: “If I found myself wearing what you’re wearing I’d stay indoors.”

Person B responds: “If I found you wearing what I’m wearing I’d say you’d had a style overhaul.”

Person A says: “Is one of your parents human, or are they both aliens?”

Person B responds: “My parents are great fans of modern art. I’m a constant delight to them.”

Tool 2 – FOGGING

Person B responds with a gently puzzled question as if Person A has something to say and just needs to be a bit clearer.

Person A says: “Can anyone see a bucket handy? I think I’m going to be sick.”

Person B responds: “And your point is?”

Person A says: “Hide your eyes everyone. Was it the Gorgon that turns us into stone if we look directly?”

Person B responds: “And your point is?”

Tool 3 – PLEASANT:

Person B ignores the tone of what is being said and responds pleasantly to the content.

Person A says: “Mmm. Such an interesting hair style.” (delivered in cutting tone).

Person B responds: “Do you really think so, - - -? I hadn’t thought of it as a style. Sometimes I just let my hair please itself.” (- - - Ideally the response includes addressing Person A by name.)

Person A says: “Mind out everyone – here comes a whopper.”

Person B responds: “Thank you so much, Jason. You’ll be rolling out the red carpet for me next.”

In each case a large part of the skill, when using the tool, is to ‘act’ so as to appear calm and comfortable, clear and non-aggressive.

For more about Fogging see the *Guide on Teasing, name-calling and bullying*. For more about using humour, see the booklets listed on page 4 of that *Guide* which are available from *Changing Faces*.

With the class

- a) As a whole or organised into small groups, brainstorm all the unkind, snide, and clever-dick things young people might say about other about clothes, footwear, hair, skin, teeth, body-shape... Record this for later.
- b) Introduce the ‘tools’ outlined above. Describe how they work and give examples.
- c) Organise the class into threes. Each trio consists of X - the teaser, Y - the vulnerable person, Z - the coach.

X will draw upon the list of cutting remarks etc created at (a) above. Only the material listed at (a) can be used.

Y will practice being on the receiving end and using (and only using) the tools outlined above. Y will choose which of the ‘tools’ at (b) to use to defuse X’s unkind remark.

Z will help Y to choose which of the tools suits them best – they can practice one, two or all three. Z will then coach and support Y, paying particular attention to stance, voice tone, eye-contact, and body language. Y needs to appear calm and confident but not aggressive.

- d) Run the scene – X’s insult, and Y’s riposte. Some students may like to show these to the whole class. Any really good ones are well worth sharing.
- e) Repeat (c) and (d) until each student has been in all three roles.

Class members are now better equipped to deal non-aggressively with any unkind remarks which may come their way, and to support each other in difficult moments. In practice, this kind of learning, problem-solving and ‘rehearsal’ can lead to increased self-esteem and reduce incidents involving verbal harassment about appearance.

Lesson idea – ‘Living it’

This lesson activity can be run in one 50 min. session but best results may be achieved by breaking the tasks up across two separate sessions

Aims:

- sharing accurate information and promote understanding among other pupils about the injury illness or condition that affects the way your pupil looks
- increasing awareness of the way we are all affected by appearance and difference

- developing socially positive ways of responding when someone looks different.

Beforehand:

(A) If you have a pupil in your class, year or elsewhere in the school, who has a disfigurement and you want to use this lesson activity to support them -

Arrange a meeting with the pupil, and parents if appropriate, well ahead of running the lesson(s). The pupil should be involved in planning the lesson – though she need not necessarily participate in the lesson itself.

Your pupil and her parents may fear that drawing attention to the disfigurement will make things more difficult, not easier. In fact, ‘giving information’ to pupils about a pupil’s condition is not helpful. However, research into people’s responses to disfigurement and all the practical experience of the staff at Changing Faces confirms that a *dialogue* which includes an item of basic information about looking different does help other people to take looking different in their stride and engage with the person more positively.

If your pupil is ready to participate in the lesson, work closely with her (and her parents) to put together a basic fact sheet that she is happy with, to form the basis of a scenario which you will prepare beforehand – see below.

If your pupil does not want to participate, this should be respected. The whole of this lesson can be worked through without any direct reference to your pupil or to the condition that affects the way she looks. See below.

(B) If you do not have a pupil in your class, year or elsewhere in the school, who has a disfigurement, or if the pupil does not want their own experience to be brought into this lesson activity -

Prepare an information sheet about an injury or condition which affects appearance making sure the scenario does not resemble any pupil’s actual experience.

The novel *Face* by Benjamin Zephaniah (Bloomsbury ISBN 074754154X) gives a clear and accessible account of the experience of sustaining burn injuries in a car crash, and having to face the world with a ‘new’ face. A more detailed autobiographical account is available in the book *Changing Faces* by James Partridge (ISBN 1900928124 available from *Changing Faces*).

Alternatively, it can work well to ‘invent’ a condition or syndrome and name it after the town or district where your school is situated or after the school itself.

Prepare a scenario which will introduce the lesson. Base it on the information sheet developed from A or B above. Use the examples below to guide you.

Scenario A

You notice lumpy patches developing on your skin. Your GP prescribes various different treatments but without success. Your skin is really getting very bumpy now. It is very noticeable. Your GP refers you to a dermatologist at the hospital. Several visits to and stays in hospital later with numerous medical tests and examinations by specialists, you get your diagnosis –..... syndrome (eg Northern High Syndrome). It is a very rare condition. The cause is not fully understood yet and there is no effective treatment. The dermatologist will invite you back for a check-up from time to time but says you are going to have to learn to live with this condition.

Scenario B

You wake up in hospital after an accident – you can't remember the details but have a dim memory of a fire. You soon discover that your face and hands are covered in bandages. Time passes and you gradually recover. When the dressings are removed, you can see as well as feel that the scarred skin on your hands is different from how it used to look. You ask to see yourself in a mirror – your face looks noticeably different too. You continue to recover, at home now, with visits to the hospital for check-ups. You begin to realise the scarring is permanent. The doctor confirms this. You are going to have to live with your altered appearance.

With the class:

- a) Introduce and establish the scenario.
- b) Organise your class into threes - Person A has the altered appearance and Persons B and C are in the role of supportive best friends. Allocate the role of scribe or recorder.
- c) Work together to answer the following:
 - What does it feel like to discover that you now have this syndrome or permanent scarring?
 - What does it feel like to look different?
 - How do other people react when they see you? What assumptions and mistakes are other people likely to make because of how you now look?

People who look different commonly find that other people:

 - turn away – perhaps to avoid staring
 - ask “What happened to you?” which is a very nosy question coming from someone you hardly know or have never seen before
 - try to carry on as normal but continually stare at the disfigurement so that it's hard for them 'act natural' when you're together
 - try to look after you and patronise you because they don't know that it's just your skin that's affected – they think it's your brain or your mind too.
 - How will you deal with other people's reactions, comments, questions to your altered appearance?
 - What personal qualities could you emphasise to help with feeling better about yourself and to counterbalance the extra attention others now pay to your unusual appearance?
 - Thinking about the way other people (e.g. in a bus queue or at a party) respond to your disfigurement, what would you like them to think and say?
 - What will you say about your unusual appearance when you meet someone you would really like to go out with?
- d) Invite pupils to design and draft a poster, a web page or an item for a magazine for young people, to improve the way they respond when they encounter someone who looks different.