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

Guide 6. Developing self-esteem

Self-esteem is closely linked to achieving positive social interactions. Due to other people's reactions to unusual appearance, especially if the face is affected, young people with disfigurements often struggle to achieve a good and enjoyable social flow. In addition, almost all young people have some concerns about appearance and gain reassurance from a shared style and a sense of belonging among peers. Pupils who look different are particularly vulnerable to missing out on this peer support, but it is hard for any pupil with low self-esteem to gain as much as she should from school, both socially and academically.

Because of the link between self-esteem and positive social interactions, it is important to address low self-esteem alongside a programme to improve social skills. See the *Guides* on *Having something to say* and *Practical support with social skills.*

Low self-esteem is often a factor underlying difficult behaviour. The behaviour can seem merely to make everything worse for the pupil herself as well as for everyone around. But, from the viewpoint of the pupil, this difficult behaviour may be the only thing she can come up with in a desperate attempt to disguise or remove an overwhelming sense of powerlessness, incompetence etc.

Low self-esteem creates a vicious circle – difficult behaviour leading to negative responses from others and less social opportunity, leading to even lower self-esteem leading to more difficult behaviour and so on.

1 WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Quitting
Failing to engage in tasks sufficiently to be able to achieve anything, e.g., rushing towards a slip-shod end-product, giving up because it's 'boring'.

Avoiding
Quitting even before starting a task. May reject the task in a surly way, or more subtly with plausible excuses, eg "We did it last year, Miss."

Cheating
Altering or dodging the rules, explicitly or privately. If challenged, protesting innocence, appealing to reason, or accusing the challenger.

Clowning or regressing
May be trying to gain attention for something of their own choosing instead of their appearance which they cannot control. Clowning may also serve to deny or diminish the seeming importance of a task.

Controlling
Attempting to dictate to others which may come across as interfering or bossy or patronising.

Aggressive and bullying
Seeking to belittle, hurt or scapegoat others.

Passive-Aggressive	Agreeing or even offering to do something but does not follow through. May say "I forgot" or "I had to do something else." It leaves you feeling messed around.
Denying	Dismissing the importance or value of something, e.g. if not selected to go on a school trip "I didn't want to go anyway" or in the run-up to exams "Qualifications are a waste of time."
Rationalising	Making excuses for poor performance rather than accepting responsibility, especially by blaming other people or events beyond their control.

To onlookers, all these coping strategies are clearly counter-productive, and will never help the young person to feel more worthwhile or to achieve greater social acceptance. But they originate in the need to try and manage a dreadful sense of failure or imperfection. The best way forward therefore is to build self-esteem rather than to tackle and eradicate these symptoms of low self-esteem through punishment or target setting.

2 STRATEGIES FOR REPAIRING SELF-ESTEEM

The strategies outlined below are most effective when the student experiences them consistently over several months throughout the school day and also at home. It is important therefore to involve parents if possible, when establishing a self-esteem-building programme.

Low self-esteem brings with it an increased tendency to amplify every negative experience and comment while diminishing or discounting positive messages from others, e.g., by destroying work which has been praised, or by thinking – and often saying – "you're just saying that" (implying that it isn't true) if a member of staff gives positive feedback.

Make everyone welcome

When forms or year groups choose teams, for example, or break up into small groups for a learning activity, it often happens that a certain student or students are the last to be chosen and are clearly not really wanted on anyone's team. It is essential to avoid subjecting any young person to this extremely hurtful experience by ensuring that all students are allocated to teams or groups by the teacher in charge.

Organisation of assemblies, lunchtime seating arrangements, outings, duty rotas etc should always be considered in terms of the likely effect on the self-esteem of a student who is struggling to feel accepted. Make sure that everyone is included in these activities while also being careful not to make a student special – or patronised – by giving them too many special jobs to do.

Mistakes are just information

Establish a learning environment where students don't need to guard against mistakes or failure. 'Failure' is best seen as a chance to learn and do something differently next time. Staff can model this by being open and relaxed about their own experience of negative outcomes –

"As most of you have already spotted, I'm afraid I've double booked so football practice

clashes with the table-tennis tournament. Mr Khan has kindly offered to see those not doing ping-pong over to the playing field and I'm going to learn to take more care with the calendar."

Separate actions from people

Always make a clear distinction between what your pupil has done or is doing and who she is as a person. Ideally combine your concern over an unsatisfactory outcome with a more positive comment about the child as a person.

"Charlene, I'm surprised you've mislaid your homework, you're often quite on-the-ball in my lessons."

Never give pupils nick-names or negative labels - not even in your thoughts!

Keep strengths in the picture

Most people's confidence varies from one situation to another. When facing a particular challenge, it can help make a link to something we feel more sure of.

"Loading software is a bit like cooking – you either know what you're doing, or you have to follow the instructions very carefully."

Thoroughly get to know your pupil's temperament, interests and aptitudes. If some members of staff find her less difficult in their lessons, or achieve more positive outcomes with her, find out more about what seems to go well.

"Okay Maria, you look like you've got some spare energy. Maybe you'd be kind enough to hand these books out? Thanks."

Ensure tasks are do-able

Pitch tasks at the level your student can manage – neither over-protective nor too demanding. If you're not sure, check: "Are you okay showing these visitors round on your own or would you like to go with someone who's done it before?"

Give positive feedback often but carefully

As mentioned above, positive feedback can be difficult for a student with low self-esteem to receive. Such feedback will be more effective if it is clearly linked to a specific and practical instance, if it is low-key, and if you can give it the quality of making an observation rather than of 'praise'.

"You have a real eye for colour." – while looking together at a piece of work or display.

"Those poor plants do need someone to pay them some attention – thank you for watering them."

Create choices

Provide opportunities where your pupil can choose between clear, manageable alternatives.

"Do you want to type this up and print it out in the IT room, or give it a heading and punch holes in it as it is for your file?"

Link action to results

Create clear, firm guidelines and carefully delineated manageable targets with real, consistent consequences. The school ethos and behaviour policy will be important here. But make it more 'real' for your pupil by agreeing practical and achievable goals, and sharing your monitoring of progress.

"Mrs.Betts and Mr.Khan are both pleased with your homework, but Miss Hall says she hasn't had anything in from you yet. How's it going? How many of these boxes are we going to tick this week?"

Regular, well-informed reviews are crucial, not only for staff to keep tabs on a difficult or worrying pupil, but very importantly to help the pupil to see how her own decisions and actions are making a difference.

Case study

Jamie had been scalded as a baby with scarring to his head, noticeably sparse and uneven hair growth and the loss of most of his left ear. He had often been described as 'a handful' but also a 'good worker'. However, in secondary school Jamie became gradually more difficult to manage in class. In spite of previous evidence that he was of average ability with a possible flair for art and graphics, his school work was on the whole poor. Incidents were becoming more frequent in unstructured time. Staff were perplexed to note that these often appeared to follow a good lesson when Jamie had been complimented on his work. Towards the end of Jamie's fourth term in secondary school, his mother contacted the school: his occasional outbursts towards younger sister had become more frequent and more serious, and she herself had caught him being cruel to both their cat and his rabbit. She felt that this was somehow 'caused' by her trying to get him to do his homework. She was also concerned that, over the last year, her son seemed to have fallen out with everyone he had transferred with from primary school, but had not made any new friends.

The Year Head called a meeting of all the staff involved with Jamie. Jamie was not present but his parents were. Staff generally described Jamie as immature, idle and a constant source of distraction and irritation to others, although his Geography, CDT and Maths teachers viewed him more positively.

The staff were given information about living with an unusual appearance and the Year 8 form tutors agreed to run some PSHE sessions on social skills, self-perception and on strategies for fielding 'clever dick' remarks about appearance – such 'teasing' was felt to be a problem for many of Year 8 including Jamie.

A list of *do's and don'ts* was drawn up for staff to follow when working with Jamie. Eg Do ask for headings to be underlined and for work to look smart. Don't press for correct spellings at present. Do set drawing/diagrams/labelling/one-word-answers/multiple choice homework. Don't set written homework for the time being. Progress was reviewed once a month after the Year 8 team meeting, including a phone call home to collect Jamie's mother's observations.

Improvements were slow to materialise at first, but after the PSHE sessions there was a noticeable shift away from appearance related jibes among Year 8 generally. In due course Jamie was heard to answer a pupil who asked to borrow a comb, with the question "And your point is?" (See *Fogging* in the *Guide* on *Teasing, name-calling and bullying.*) Mum reported improvements at home before anything was obviously happening at school, although Jamie wrote up his rabbit hutch building exploits at some length for an English assignment, including several photographs. After the PE team took a small group to see Man U play Aston Villa, Jamie formed a 'civilised' friendship with a well-motivated lad in another form. As year 9 approached, staff were considering whether to move Jamie or the other lad, to place them in the same form.