

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

## Guide 8. Practical support with self expression

The face is a hugely important channel of communication – we see something of each other in eyes, brow, mouth, jaw and so forth. Posture, hand gestures, and certain styles of movement or stillness also communicate a great deal. Through this non-verbal expression much of our character, attitude and emotional sensibility is revealed to ourselves and to others.

### 1 FACIAL EXPRESSION AND FACIAL DISFIGUREMENT

Difficulties in developing skills of expression in self and in recognising others' expression can arise in different ways:

- During infancy there may have been less parental 'mirroring' of expression and interpretation of feelings as a result of the infant's unusual face.
- A young person with a facial disfigurement may have developed a habit of looking down or keeping their face averted
- The condition or injury which affects how a person looks, may mean that the subtle movements involved in facial expression are painful or difficult or impossible.
- The facial expression may be there but others may not see it. Instead they over focus on the disfigurement and fail to see the young person more fully; or, if they have been told not to stare, they may avoid looking.
- A young person may have learned not to show their feelings because of injunctions to "be brave" during painful medical procedures, or to "ignore it" when being subject to teasing or name-calling. Also, with the aim of not being noticed, a person may have cultivated a form of self-effacement which includes minimising their facial expressions.

### 2 OBSERVING INTERACTIONS AND IDENTIFYING FEELINGS

It is easy to make assumptions about how much skill a young person has developed in conveying, receiving and interpreting facial expressions. As a teacher, you are in a good position to make observations of your pupil's capacity for non-verbal communication in various situations.

- Does she show expressions to convey pleasure, enthusiasm, reluctance, frustration, impatience, irritation, anger, happiness, delight, sadness, hurt, fear, anxiety?
- Can she convey these feelings among peers? With staff?
- How readily and accurately does she 'read' other people's non-verbal expression?

Any of these and more should be apparent occasionally or often as each day brings familiar and new experiences, encounters, challenges and achievements. The practical suggestions below can enrich your pupil's capacity for non-verbal communication.

Learning activities can be delivered through Drama, English or PSHE. All pupils stand to benefit, not just the one whose scope for non-verbal communication may be affected by their disfigurement. But it will obviously be important to monitor this particular pupil's progress especially closely and, if necessary, to arrange for further one-to-one input and encouragement. If you suspect a pupil is experiencing significant difficulties in expression and communication, specialist help may be available through a speech therapist, psychologist or drama therapist.

### Case study

Lizzie was born with Goldenhar so one side of her face was much smaller than the other. Her hearing was affected and her speech was rather unclear. She was an average pupil in most areas but excelled in sport. However, she struggled to participate in team games – there was no problem with the playing of the game itself and she was regularly selected for netball and hockey teams, but whenever the team was called together to discuss tactics for instance, Lizzie was apt to suddenly run off a few yards and 'jump about'. It gave the impression that she was distressed.

After talking to a *Changing Faces* specialist, Lizzie's PE teacher wondered if Lizzie did not know what her feelings were or what they meant – possibly due to a lack of 'mirroring' in her early years, related to her unusual face.

The teacher therefore created special opportunities for Lizzie to talk about and describe what was going on for her at the different stages of the game. In fact, she seemed to be feeling a strong mixture of excitement and determination, when she ran off. The PE teacher suggested that the captain get everyone to hold hands and shake their gripped hands in an 'excited-determined' way, saying (or indeed shouting) something like "We can do it!" for a few moments whenever they came together.

The team as a whole seemed to gain from this but Lizzie especially became less given to running off, and subsequently made more use of hand gestures generally.

## 3 DEVELOPING EXPRESSIVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS

The activities described below can be used with a group or one-to-one. If you have a student with restricted or absent ability to make facial expressions, you will need to adapt your approach so that you focus on gesture, stance and body-language.

Verbal expression is always important but especially so for a young person with restricted capacity for facial expression. Vocabulary, pitch, emphasis, tone and volume will all affect expression.

## Experience – feeling – expression

Draw up a table listing events that affect us in column A – obviously, it will be best to identify events which are meaningful for the individual or group you are working with. Ask the student or group to imagine the experience in column A. Then in column B list words to describe the feelings they might have.

Finally, ask the children (or the child you are working with 1:1) to demonstrate this feeling using face, arms, hands, etc. (but not voice!) Use column C to note the kind of non-verbal expression that conveys the feeling or state of mind in column B.

A	B	C
Getting picked for the mini-bus trip you really wanted to go on	Happy, triumphant	eg. 'high fives', thumbs up, arms up high with fists raised
Sitting down to do an exam	Nervous, reluctant	eg. twitchy fingers...
Getting exam results which turn out better than you had feared	Relieved	
Turning up in your old clothes when everyone else is dressed up	Embarrassed, Self-conscious, resentful	
Walking with a blister on your heel	Hurt	
Seeing the boy/girl you like talking to somebody else	Jealous, angry	
Missing the bus	Frustrated, annoyed	
Leading your team to victory in a tournament	Proud, happy	

Use large and small versions of the same expression or movement and see how scale can affect the message conveyed.

Re-visit this kind of learning activity as often as necessary to help your pupil to gain mastery of expressing their feelings and reactions verbally and/or physically.

## Communicating without words

Young people who are socially comfortable tend to have developed good communication skills and can understand what both they themselves and what others might be thinking or feeling.

A display of photographs of people in magazines and newspapers can reveal something of non-verbal communication. Photographs illustrating sports or news stories or stills from films are often particularly varied in the range of expressions that they show.

- Number the pictures to use the display for activities exploring non-verbal expression.
- Invite students to describe and name the feelings or inner states which the various subjects appear to be experiencing.
- For a group, consider starting this by brain-storming for words and phrases to describe feelings and inner states.
- For an individual consider starting with a list of these already well underway.
- Invite the student(s) to explore experiences they may have had which made them feel like the people shown appear to be feeling
- Invite them to mime one of the expressions in the pictures (ie with their own face and/or body language). The task is then to identify which of the expressions is being simulated.

## Spoken language – identifying and conveying feeling

Tape two or three extracts from radio dramas and plays. It is usually best to focus on just one extract at a time and to listen to it more than once.

- Name and list all the feelings or inner states affecting the characters
- While listening, make a mind map of interactions and feelings between characters
- Simulate the facial expression, gesture and body language of a character

Some students will enjoy making a short 'radio play' of their own – creating a story line, writing the script, rehearsing and acting into a microphone, using expressive voice tone to add atmosphere to the mini-drama. Vocabulary, emphasis, pitch, tone and volume will all be valuable in bringing the play or playlet 'to life'.

## Modelling self expression

During general school activities, look for opportunities to model 'saying and showing' your own reactions to incidents, events and people. Students benefit from:

- having feelings named and acknowledged
- distinguishing between feelings, e.g. anger may be disappointment or irritation
- seeing feelings expressed and managed appropriately.