

GUIDE 1. STARTING SECONDARY SCHOOL

When preparing for the arrival of a young person who has an unusual appearance, all staff will need information about how looking different affects people of all ages. You will need some practical 'do's and don'ts' for dealing with reactions such as staring, comments and asking questions. Ideally these preparations should be undertaken well before the new student joins your school.

It usually works best if a named member of staff, for example the year head, oversees the transition – information gathering, information sharing with colleagues and maintaining a good open communication channel with the prospective new student and their parents/carers.

The new student will probably have had a settled period in junior school where everyone has become used to the way they look. The staff there will be an important source of information about how the young person has managed and how the new challenges can be approached most effectively.

At an early stage, arrange a meeting with your prospective new student and their family. See the [Guide on Working with parents/carers and siblings](#). Ask what the family call the mark, scar or condition that affects the way their child looks and how they describe it. Also find out how the young person talks about it?

Families manage other people's reactions in very different ways:

- giving positive answers to other people's questions
- reacting with hostility to strangers' reactions to their child's appearance
- responding with humour to diffuse strangers' uneasiness about visible difference
- ignoring the unwanted attention their child receives
- avoiding staring and curiosity by avoiding things like shopping, using the leisure centre or swimming pool
- using different approaches at different times

You need to ask the parents/carers and the young person how they deal with other people's reactions to the way their child looks and how they manage when encountering new people.

It is also important to make contact at an early stage with other professionals who may be involved. Request and read all the assessments and reports about this new student to help you identify and meet any needs they may have, and ensure good ongoing support. Also, if difficulties do arise at a later stage, you will be well placed to share your concerns and seek additional input if required. See the [Guide on Working collaboratively with other professionals](#).

1 LOOKING AT YOUR OWN FEELINGS AND BELIEFS

Anyone encountering a person who has a visible difference can experience many different reactions. This is especially so when it is a young person who has a mark, scar or condition that affects the way they look. However, with all the demands teachers meet every day, you may not have time to pause and fully register your own reactions when you first meet your new student whose appearance is unusual.

Find time to check yourself out before the new student arrives. You may feel embarrassed, shocked, upset, angry, vulnerable, repulsed, or touched with pity by what has happened to this young person. Recognising your own feelings and beliefs about appearance and visible difference will help you to

support the student better. It will be helpful to watch this [4-minute video about unconscious bias and teaching](#).

...about appearance

How important is appearance for you? What does a person's outward appearance say about them? How are you affected by people's appearance?

Try and notice other aspects of people as well as their physical appearance. What about their character, their attitudes, energy, sensitivity, imagination or humour? What aspects of other people do you tend to notice first?

...about visible difference

What are your assumptions or beliefs about visible difference? Throughout history and across many cultures, beauty has often been linked to goodness, virtue and happy endings, ugliness to badness, sin and punishment. What do you think? What are your hopes and fears for this young person, both now and in the future?

There are in fact many people with visible differences leading full lives, with careers, families, and all the usual ups and downs. They have developed the social skills and strategies, and built up the self-esteem to respond effectively each time they encounter someone who stares or doesn't know where to look.

2 LOOKING AND BEING LOOKED AT

Children, teenagers and adults who look different all experience staring, questions and comments, especially from people who haven't met them before. Your new student will have had experience of furtive glances, unabashed staring, questions and comments both well-meant and blatantly rude. Most of us find it unpleasant to be stared at or pestered with questions, for whatever reason. But when someone joins your school who has a visible difference, it is going to be important to handle other people's reactions appropriately.

It is important not to prohibit staring and curiosity. Making friends begins with looking and being looked at. The other young people are likely to look carefully, perhaps with surprise and interest. They may ask questions – of the newcomer themselves, of a classmate, or, occasionally, of a familiar member of staff. If these expressions of interest are discouraged the student who looks different is at risk of finding it harder to make friends.

3 LINKING WITH PREVIOUS TEACHERS WHO KNOW THE CHILD

Arrange to observe your prospective new student in their current class and at breaktime. Talk to their current teacher about what they're like at school, including the social environment school provides. The focus of any information about your new student's visible difference needs to be the young person rather than the visible difference. You should try to involve the teacher, the young person and their parents/carers in finding out more about the young person. Some of the things you may want to know about are:

- Who is this young person and what are they like? What information do I need about the young person's visible difference?
- Does the mark, scar or condition affect the young person in ways that may impact their engagement with school life (Speech? Breathing? Swallowing? Hearing? Sight? Sensitivity to heat or cold? Fine motor skills?) and what has the school done to mitigate these?

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- Is the young person's condition stable or will it / could it alter? If so, would the alteration be gradual or sudden?
- Does the young person have any ongoing treatment, or is any medical treatment planned?
- How is school attendance affected (or may be affected in future?)
- What about the young person's personality, strengths and abilities? What resources does he/she bring to the challenge of visible difference?
- How well does the young person engage socially with other, their peers and with adults they know well?
- How does the young person respond when strangers stare and comment or ask a question? Does the young person have a response that they're happy with? Does this always or sometimes work?
- What form of words has been used by staff to respond to other people's expressions of curiosity or concern?

This information will help you prepare effectively for the new student's visits to your school and for their eventual start with you.

4 PREPARING STAFF FOR THE NEW CHALLENGE

All the staff at your school will have an important part to play in ensuring that everyone becomes comfortable and confident about visible difference.

Sharing information

...about the new student

Carefully plan a brief information session, perhaps as part of a more general staff meeting, before the new student makes their first visit from the feeder school. Find out whether the young person and/or their parents would like to attend. From your previous meetings, your observations of the student in their current school, and your discussions with their current teacher and other professionals involved, you will have information about both the young person and the mark, scar or condition that affects the way he looks. Prepare information for colleagues in collaboration with the prospective student themselves and with their parents/carers, using words acceptable to them, so that no information is passed on without their full consent.

Through your usual pre-admission meeting(s) with the new student and your skills of observation and assessment, you will also have information for colleagues concerning this new student's development, strengths and needs, both educationally and socially (as for any new student joining your school).

...about the social psychology of appearance and visible difference

You will need to help colleagues develop an additional awareness and understanding of the issues associated with visible difference. It is essential to deal positively with other people's reactions to a person who looks different. See section 2 above.

The new student's social, psychological and educational development will be affected (and may well already have been affected) by their experience of staring, comments and questions. The young person is now going to have to face everyone at the new school – yourself, your colleagues and all the other students, most of them older.

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All staff will need to be able to deal simply and effectively with curiosity and comments which other students may express within their hearing, or may communicate non-verbally by looking too long or askance, staring or other reactions.

There are useful CPD resources for teachers and school staff called [A World of Difference](#) which can be used before the student starts or during their time at school.

This can be achieved by:

- explaining the main issues around visible difference as set out in this *Guide*, perhaps as part of a staff meeting.
- at the same time providing all staff with a brief information sheet which sets out what to say. To prepare this, discuss with the student, the parents/carers and the primary school teachers, what kind of answer they would like to give to anyone asking about their visible difference. Agree a form of words which the student is comfortable with for responding to surprise, curiosity etc. See the example below and see also the [Guide on Having something to say](#).

EXAMPLE:

Guidance for all staff

If you see a student staring at Joel or overhear students commenting or asking each other about Joel, this is what to say:

“You seem to have noticed Joel. He was in a fire but he’s fine now.”

If a student asks you about Joel’s unusual appearance:

“Yes, Joel was in a fire but he’s fine now....”

Then follow on with something else to move the conversation on in a natural and appropriate way. For example,

.....You’re all new and you’ve got a space on your table- why not invite him over and introduce yourselves.

.....You’ll be fine too if you can just get these diagrams finished before the bell.

.....Have you got time to earn yourself some credit and help me take this kit upstairs?

Joel will give similar answers if anyone asks him directly.

In this way staff can help establish the fact that some people have a visible difference that affects the way they look, and that we can all be comfortable with this.

If other students’ attention to the new student seems less curious and more menacing, please see the [Guide on Teasing, name-calling and bullying](#).

You should not allow a situation to arise where the new student visits the school from junior school, or joins as a new student and becomes the object of curiosity because staff have not been prepared and trained in handling people’s reactions. Handling it well will help to ensure that the new student can enter this new stage of education safely and comfortably, so as to enjoy and achieve both educationally and socially.

...about common pitfalls

As well as issues around staring and questions, there are some other well-intentioned interventions which need to be carefully checked.

- It can seem helpful to say that a student is “...just the same as everyone else,” perhaps meaning that he or she needs the same learning and social experiences as everyone else. However, you risk losing credibility with both students and staff, who can all see that this student looks different.
- “It’s the inside that counts” is another well-meant attempt to smooth the path for a student with a visible difference. Of course the inside counts, but the outside, the way we look, counts too – especially among young people in their teens. If you avoid referring to appearance you may create problems for the future.
- TV, films and social media emphasise appearance, but even so, it is profoundly human to notice other people’s appearance and differences, especially faces. People who have a visible difference have to work with this, they cannot pretend it isn’t so.
- The young person with a visible difference will know that they are being noticed all the time, and yet no one ever says a word about it. You risk undermining the young person’s experience if their appearance is not to be mentioned.
- The student concerned may at times be worried or thoughtful about what has happened to them or how they look. If you and other adults make a rule that appearance is not to be spoken of, it will discourage the young person from talking to anyone about this.
- In social media, on television, in films and in books, characters are sometimes described and perhaps judged in terms of their appearance. If the students have been discouraged from talking about appearance and difference, the fictional book or film may become a substitute reality for them.

Take time to prepare, but don’t worry if you don’t get things right first time. It’s OK to make mistakes, but don’t give up.