

GUIDE 7. PRACTICAL SUPPORT WITH SOCIAL SKILLS

A young person with a visible difference may sometimes struggle in social situations. Different behaviours may demonstrate social difficulties.

- Being a loner
- Being the class clown
- Being too physical
- Being overbearing, wanting the last word
- Being over sensitive and easily hurt
- Being immature and needing attention
- Having trouble understanding social conventions
- Preferring to spend time with people much younger or much older than peers

A lack of positive social experiences will leave the young person unsure how to engage with others, or not wanting to, and becoming increasingly less able to do so. Of course, such behaviour can be shown by any teenager, but where a visible difference is present, the problems are compounded.

1 LEARNING TO JOIN IN

Dealing with reactions to visible difference

People who have a visible difference may feel more socially confident when they can:

- understand that everyone feels a bit curious, concerned and awkward when they see someone with a visible difference.
- learn and practise at least one strategy for use when someone stares or asks about their visible difference.
- take the initiative in setting the tone or topic of subsequent conversation.

All of these strategies take practice and require confidence and courage. See the [Guide on Having something to say](#).

Awareness of others and self

Paying more attention to others – being more curious – can help to reduce feelings of being stared at. Create opportunities to discuss characters in films and on TV. What is this person like? What makes them tick? Why do they get into the scrapes they get into? Why are they particularly liked and helped or disliked and obstructed? Extend your student's capacity for noticing and thinking about their peers.

Then invite your student to ask these questions and make these observations of themselves. Good social interactions with others depend upon a certain degree of self-awareness. Your student needs to be able to identify the kinds of things they find interesting and what doesn't interest them at all. They can also think about what kinds of activities and people they are drawn to, and who and what to avoid.

2 TEACH KEY SOCIAL SKILLS

For various reasons a young person with a visible difference, may develop a social style which is defensive or avoidant and which others experience as quite withdrawn or stand-offish. Observe how the student you are supporting behaves in class and during break times. Be prepared to address the following points to improve their ability to engage with others socially.

11-16 years. Supporting a young person with a visible difference: a teacher's guide

- Greeting people by name and with eye contact
- Using people's names more
- Smiling more and making eye contact
- Asking to join in an activity that others
- Asking someone else if they would like some help
- Suggesting a game or activity
- Start a new conversation, or change the subject with a question

Each of these new skills can be practised with an adult, learning new forms of words and actions before using them in a practical situation. This learning process requires courage and patience.

Create social opportunities

A young person who is lacking the confidence to approach other people will feel even more inadequate if you insist on them making an attempt. It is preferable, especially at first, to look for situations in which the practical opportunities that exist in the school can be used to help the student try out new kinds of interactions with others.

Address difficult social situations

The action chart on the next page shows how a student was helped to:

- review the week at school and anticipate particular instances of social difficulty
- devise and outline new approaches which would be worth trying
- plan a specific occasion and try out the new approach
- evaluate how it went.

3 SOCIAL SKILLS PLANNER/LOG

Challenging situation	What I could try	Dates of attempts	How did it go?
Science lessons with Mr Khan - when we do an experiment in pairs. New neighbours at home - moved in last month. Two children, girl and boy, I don't know their names At lunch time - in the hall which is crowded and noisy and horrible.	Don't hang about worrying - go and ask someone to be my partner.	3.10.20 I asked Ollie. We had to test what dissolved and what didn't.	We talked about gaming and found that we had a lot in common. The experiment was OK too.
At lunch time - in the hall which is crowded and noisy and horrible.	Look for a space next to someone who's sitting on their own and get talking to them. For example, What form are you in? Have you ever had school meals or always packed lunches?	14.10.20	It was really interesting. I met this boy called Mark who only had crisps and bars and stuff. He said he wished his mum would make him sandwiches, but she has told him he's old enough to make his own. I swapped half mine for some of his crisps. I asked him what he eats in the evening - pizza is his favourite. He asked what happened to my nose, etc. so I told him about my cleft. Two of his friends joined in and he introduced me. We mostly talked about food. I hardly noticed how noisy and dreadful the hall is.