7-11 GUIDE 5. HAVING SOMETHING TO SAY

Children can be forthright with their curiosity and will ask direct questions such as "What's that on your face?" Many adults subscribe to the commonly held belief that personal remarks are rude and that a visible difference should never be noticed or discussed. As it is not nice to be stared at, parents often tell their own children not to stare.

But children often avoid staring by turning away from the child who looks different. The child with a visible difference will then find it harder to play socially and make friends.

All the research into the social experiences of people with visible differences indicates that it is more helpful for the person with the visible difference to have responses to staring which include tolerating some initial curiosity, even if it seems like 'staring', and saying something very brief about the way they look. This puts other people – who cannot but notice the visible difference – at their ease and enables ordinary social interactions to follow.

1 MODELLING EFFECTIVE RESPONSES

Much of what children say and do comes from watching and experiencing adult behaviour. By responding effectively whenever anyone stares or asks questions about your pupil who looks different, you and your colleagues will achieve the following:

- Your pupil will learn to manage other people's reactions in ways which are socially positive.
- You will help the child to understand that new people cannot help being concerned or curious and that a potentially awkward situation can be handled in a straightforward way.
- Your responses will enable everyone to learn how to take difference in their stride.

Having no response prepared leaves a child at risk of reacting anxiously, defensively or with annoyance – leading to unsatisfactory social interactions. By making a positive and effective response, people who look different can improve social interactions. By following these simple steps yourself you are modelling it for your pupil:

1. Recognise that surprise and curiosity are normal reactions and not expressions of deliberate unkindness

2. Respond with just enough information and reassurance to enable the other person to settle their thoughts

3. Move the conversation on in an appropriate way to a related or a different subject.

The child you are supporting will gradually understand that when they meet new people there will be curiosity and maybe concerned. Rather than being annoyed or daunted by this, they can deal positively with a potentially awkward situation. The age at which a child is able to do this will vary. All children need the watchful support and modelled interventions of the adults around them.

Modelling good social responses to curiosity about visible difference is useful even when a child who has a visible difference does not seem to be aware of reactions to their difference. Having no response prepared leaves a child at risk of reacting anxiously, defensively or with annoyance – leading to unsatisfactory social interactions.

2 DECIDING WHAT TO SAY

The exact form of words that everyone will use needs to be discussed with parents/carers and the child. Find out if the child already uses a specific form of words to describe their visible difference (for example 'It's my birthmark').

If they have not yet thought about this, you will need to work with the parents/carers and the child to find words and phrases that feel comfortable. This calls for sensitivity and respect. There may be painful issues for parents/carers about what has happened to their child, or concerns about diagnosis and medical language. Parents'/carers' cultural background may also have a bearing on what they want to say.

It can be helpful to draw up a list of all the things you and the parents can think of that you might say, and then pick out the ones which seem to work best. Here are some examples which may be helpful to get started.

- That's just the way Millie's face is.
- Parminder has a scar. She was hurt but she is OK now
- Masood has one ear like yours and one folded-up ear.
- Ava has had a pink mark on her face since she was a baby.
- It's got along medical name so it's called NF for short.
- No, you can't catch it.
- Yes, I think it does get sore. Noah has to keep putting special cream on his skin.

If you, the parents/carers and the child can arrive at two or three options, it will then be very useful to see if the child has a preference. You or a parent/carer need to ask what the child would like to say if someone asked them about the way they look. You can then discuss the options you jointly came up with. The child might like to have some time to try out different responses before choosing. The child may also use different responses in different situations. It is important to make the child feel empowered. You could play out a situation together like a 'pretend' game.

You may all decide that you want to start with everyone using the same simple form of words, both in and out of school. As the child becomes more confident and experienced, they may develop a more extensive range of responses depending on the social situation.

3 MOVING THE CONVERSATION ON

This is a key social skill to model as part of 'having something to say'. When you model it you will be helping everyone to be more comfortable with difference. Later, when the child is ready to start responding to comments, the ability to move the conversation on will help to avoid too much attention to their visible difference while showing something positive about themself as a person. It is important to work with the child on building these skills, as it may take time.

Children with visible differences find the following kinds of follow-ons particularly useful.

1. Showing an interest in the child who asked

   Teacher: "That's just the way Jackson's skull is. Is your skull smooth as a ball all over or can you feel any little ups and downs?" (Run your fingers over your own forehead and scalp too!).

   Child: "It's a scar from when a dog bit me. Have you ever had a bad cut or a big bruise?"

2. Maintaining conversation but changing the subject

   Teacher: "Ivy was in a fire but she's okay now. Let's wipe the tables, shall we?"

Child: "It's called a birthmark – I always had it. Do you want play footie with us?"

3. Ending the conversation

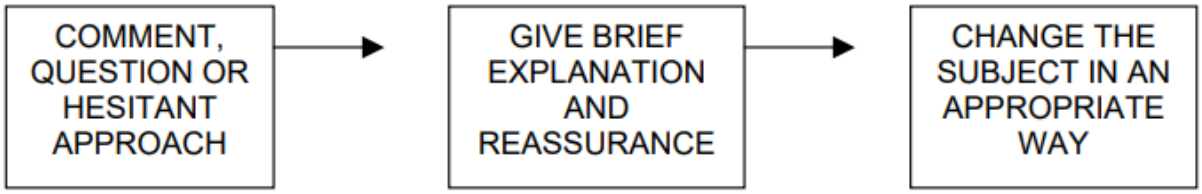
Teacher: "Sita has eczema. It makes her skin very dry and sore. You can't catch it. Do you want to get your coat and go out to play?"

Child: "It's just the way my head is. My Mum's waiting for me – see ya."

Learning and rehearsing in a 'safe' situation, e.g. role-play, can help the child gain confidence in using planned responses. Children can be helped to do this by using toys or puppets to try out interactions.

If or when the child with a visible difference is able to give their own response to comments or questions about the way they look, notice how these interactions develop. Some children are much more socially fluent than others and you will be able to judge how much help your pupil needs with their 'scripts'.

4 GETTING EVERYONE INVOLVED



All the adults in you're the school need to be prepared to 'model' the process of taking the initiative, giving a brief explanation wherever the situation requires it, and moving the conversation on to something else. This information can be presented to staff as part of their professional development, preferably before the new child joins you. Staff will need to know what to look out for, how to respond, and how to move the conversation on naturally.

It can be helpful if the parents of the other children can learn about this too so that they know what to say if their child saves up their questions until after school. As mentioned before, parents may (from the best of intentions) want to tell their child that it's rude to talk about it.

Children and staff will find it helpful if they use the exact form of words which has been agreed with the pupil and their parents/carers. They will also need examples of how to move the conversation on in each of the three ways described in section three above. You might judge it appropriate to run off an information sheet about this as a handout for staff.

Occasionally a staff member will need to override a strong inclination to handle the situation in a different way, perhaps because they are uncomfortable or believe it is wrong to talk about visible difference in this way. It may be useful if staff can read some of the Guides from this set, e.g. Starting junior school.

If staff doubt the need for 'having something to say' because the pupil is known and accepted by everyone they meet at school, it will be important to emphasise the child's needs beyond school and the school's obligation to teach with these needs in mind.

- School trips
- Sports, music and other activities involving pupils from other schools
- Weekends and school holidays

- A new pupil or member of staff joining the school, including supply teachers.

The ability to manage interactions with new people is a key social skill for anyone who has a noticeable appearance, and a key social skill for making friends.

5 CONSIDERING SIBLINGS

A young child may have a brother or sister who gets comments and questions about their sibling's difference. They can learn to deal with curiosity, concern and comments by using the techniques of prepared responses described above. For more information about how a child's visible difference can affect brothers and sisters, see the Guide on Working with parents and siblings.