

## 7-11 GUIDE 8. SELF-EXPRESSION

Facial expressions are of great importance not only for communication among individuals but also because they embody our sense of self.

The experience of people with facial visible differences of different kinds demonstrates the importance of facial embodiment to our emotional well-being. It is through the face that our emotional sensibility is revealed to ourselves and others, although body language does also play a big role in our non-verbal communication.

Children who can recognise facial expressions accurately in others will more readily learn to recognise their own and others' feelings and respond appropriately.

Competence in understanding and managing these interactions is as important to a child's development as academic/cognitive progress.

### 1 FACIAL EXPRESSION AND FACIAL VISIBLE DIFFERENCE

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

- Child habitually avoids the gaze of others – looks down or keeps face averted.
- Child's face cannot readily make the subtle movements involved in facial expression, usually because of unusual bone structure, paralysis, or lack of flexibility of skin or other tissue due to scarring for instance.
- Child has been encouraged to 'be brave' during painful medical procedures such as changing dressings on burns – lack of expression may have been rewarded.
- Others may simply not pay enough attention to what the child is trying to communicate – over-focusing on the visible difference, failing to see the child more fully; or if they have been told not to stare, others may avoid looking at the child.

### 2 OBSERVING INTERACTIONS AND IDENTIFYING FEELINGS

It is easy to make assumptions about how much skill a child has developed in conveying, receiving and interpreting facial expressions. As a teacher, you are in a good position to make observations of the child in different situations to see if they can show expressions to convey pleasure, enthusiasm, reluctance, frustration, impatience, irritation, anger, happiness, delight, sadness, hurt, fear, anxiety. Can they convey these feelings to other children and to adults? Ask parents/carers about how the child copes in more familiar and comfortable environments.

### 3 MODELLING SELF-EXPRESSION

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

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

### 4 DEVELOPING EXPRESSIVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS

All children need opportunities to develop skills of self-expression and the language needed to describe their own understanding. A child with a visible difference may need support to develop

## 5 COMMUNICATING WITHOUT WORDS

Children who are socially comfortable tend to have developed good communication skills and can understand what another person might be thinking or feeling.

As children grow and mature, social interactions become more complex and subtle, calling for more complex non-verbal (and verbal) communications:

- Facial expression
- Tone of voice
- Gesture
- Movement and stance

A display of photographs of people in magazines and newspapers can show how people communicate without words. Photographs illustrating sports or news stories or stills from films are often particularly varied in the range of expressions that they show. Try to select images that represent the school's commitment to diversity.