

## 7-11 GUIDE 12. TRANSFER TO SECONDARY SCHOOL

When a pupil has a visible difference, the transition to secondary school is often a particularly anxious time for both child and parents/carers. In most cases the child will be leaving a relatively small school where everyone knows everyone else, and arriving in a much larger school with huge numbers of older children and teachers.

In addition to all the usual concerns about starting secondary school, there will be specific anxieties about staring, comments, bullying and questions among so many new people. From being out and about in various situations among unfamiliar people, the child and their family will know that entering any new situation involves exposure and scrutiny.

If the pupil has made good friends at junior school, there will be worries about retaining these friendships as well as about making new friends at the new school. Alternatively, if the pupil feels isolated at junior school, the new school may be seen as an opportunity to make a fresh start – with the underlying fear that things will still not go well socially.

These fears and anxieties are quite valid. Older children tend to be less accepting and more judgemental<sup>1</sup>. Older children are more likely both to feel and to express dislike of a child with a visible difference. Children and teenagers with a visible difference tend to have fewer friends – decreasing with age<sup>2</sup>. People with facial visible difference who cope well are very clear that friends as well as family are important factors in their resilience<sup>3</sup>. If the transition to secondary school includes loss of friends and/or a failure to make new friends, positive outcomes long-term are put at risk.

Alongside all the usual meetings and visits which precede the child's move to their new school, two specific kinds of additional preparations will be needed.

- The staff at the new school will need to prepare for pupils' reactions of staring, curiosity and concern about the new pupil's appearance so that they can respond in ways which are socially positive for everyone.
- The pupil themselves will need some preparation too for the challenge of meeting new young people, most of them older, who have not seen them before.

Allow plenty of time for these preparations – begin them well before the first visit the children make to their new school.

If there is a delay in establishing which pupils will be attending which schools (if a particular secondary school is oversubscribed for instance) staff preparations may be delayed. But it will be quite possible to work with the child so that they can learn and practise skills and strategies for managing other people's reactions to their visible difference.

### 1 PREPARING THE PUPIL FOR SECONDARY SCHOOL

A child who has a visible difference will get on much better if they have:

- a basic understanding of why people react as they do to his unusual appearance

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<sup>1</sup> Richardson (1970) quoted in Bull, R. & Rumsey, N. (1988) *The Social Psychology of Facial Appearance*, Springer-Verlag, New York Inc.

<sup>2</sup> Several studies summarised in Kish, V. and Lansdown, R. (2000) in Frances, J. (2004) *Educating Children with Facial Disfigurement – Creating Inclusive School Communities*, RoutledgeFalmer, London p68.

<sup>3</sup> Coles-Gale, B. (2001) in Frances, J. (2004) (op. cit.).

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- at least one strategy for dealing with curiosity in a positive way
- some social skills for talking about themselves and asking others about themselves.

This is a lot to think about, so it may be useful to run some sessions at the end of primary school to help prepare the child for their next steps.

It will be useful to get some information from the child and their parents/carers about how they manage when meeting unfamiliar children and adults for the first time. You may be able to observe some of these things if you take a group on a trip or visit. This might be a visit to a nearby school, a visit to a museum or exhibition, or an event at a local leisure centre. You might notice:

- How the child behaves in unfamiliar surroundings. Are they nervous or confident?
- How other people seem when they notice the child? For example, do you see any children notice and then draw their friends' attention to them? (This is quite a common response when groups of children see someone they haven't met before who has a visible difference.)
- Whether the child stays close to the classmates they already know well, or do they engage with or speak to anyone new?
- Whether the child is over-friendly to strangers?

Use this checklist to work with your pupil in preparing for meeting new people at secondary school:

1. How aware is the child of other people's reactions? Is the child aware that most people will not have seen anyone before who has the mark, scar or condition that affects the way they look? What does the child think about this?
2. Does the child have any ideas of their own about what they might like to say when students at the new school stare or ask questions about their appearance?
3. Is the child happy to answer questions?
4. When people ask, what does the child say? (For more about learning this essential social skill, see the *Guide on Having something to say.*) How comfortable / uncomfortable is the child with this?
5. Would the child like help to work out some answers, and opportunities to practise?
6. Can the child talk in more detail about their visible difference? (for example, when getting to know another pupil better and becoming friends.) How comfortable / uncomfortable are they with this?
7. Would the child like some help with saying a bit more about their visible difference and some of the experiences they have had?
8. Can the child talk about other aspects of themselves too – music or sport or other interests and enthusiasms, likes and dislikes, what they enjoy doing?
9. Can the child ask other people about themselves and get to know them?
10. Would the child like help with this and opportunities to practise their social skills?

Some of the points on this checklist will be useful for all pupils moving on to their new school. For more about getting on well with other children, see the *Guide on Practical support with social skills.*

## 2 WORKING TOGETHER WITH YOUR PUPIL'S PARENTS/CARERS

It will also be important to ask the parents how they and their child get on when they encounter new people.

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- Do they have established strategies for coping with reactions?
- What do they say if anyone makes a comment or asks a question?
- What would they like to say in such situations?
- What sort of words do they prefer when they discuss their child's visible difference? Would they like help in dealing with reactions from parents of other children at the new school such as comments, questions or just staring?

Explain to the parents that you are planning to teach their child to respond with confidence when other children at the new school, many of them older, are curious about their appearance.

Parents/carers may welcome the opportunity to work with the school to think about what will help their child.

### 3 WORKING WITH STAFF AT THE NEW SCHOOL

Because visible difference is relatively rare, most teachers will have had little experience of teaching a pupil who looks different. They will need to know:

- reactions such as curiosity, concern and looking or staring are quite usual.
- the best way to manage looks and stares is to say something very brief about the visible difference and then move on. (See the [Guide on Having something to say](#).)
- the quality of the pupil's social interactions will have an impact on their self-esteem and consequently on school experiences and outcomes longer-term.
- the Equality Act, states that severe disfigurement (visible difference) is a disability and requires schools to anticipate and make adjustments so that a pupil or prospective pupil with a visible difference will not experience less favourable treatment (see the [Introduction to these Guides](#)).
- the special social and psychological issues associated with visible difference should be understood and addressed whether or not the pupil and their parents/carers consider the visible difference to be a disability.

It is essential to avoid a situation where a pupil visits or starts a new school, and all the other pupils turn to look at whatever it is about their appearance that is different, and staff have not been prepared and do not know how to respond.

Staff at the new school should ideally obtain a set of Teacher's Guides 11-16 years, which begins with [Starting secondary school](#).