

## GUIDE 1. STARTING EARLY YEARS

When preparing for the arrival of a child who has a visible difference, all staff will need information about how looking different affects both adults and other young children. You will need some practical 'do's and don'ts' for dealing with reactions such as staring, touching the child's unusual feature, making comments and asking questions. Ideally these preparations should be undertaken well before the new child starts with you.

Home visits will enable you to begin getting to know the child and their family. Ask how the family prefers to refer to their child's condition, injury or illness and how they describe it. Remember that not all visible differences are disabilities and parents may not see them as such.

Some families may need to spend some time and thought on this.

Also ask parents/carers how they deal with other people's reactions to the way their child looks because families cope in different ways. Although these will vary, they may include:

- protecting their child from staring and curiosity by avoiding situations such as playgrounds and supermarkets
- developing positive answers for other people's questions
- being critical or angry with people who show surprise and concern about their child's visible difference
- paying no attention to any unwanted attention their child receives
- using different approaches at different times, perhaps including all of the above.

Understanding the family's experience of visible difference will help you to create a comfortable and positive experience for the child when she/he joins your early years setting. [See also the guide on Working with parents and siblings.](#)

Arrange to meet, at an early stage, any other practitioners and service providers who work with this child. If meetings are not possible, be sure to read all the assessments and reports about him/her. This will help you identify and meet all the needs he/she may have, and to 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 AND BEING LOOKED AT

Both children and adults who have a visible difference often experience staring, questions and comments, especially from people who haven't met them before. Most of us find it unpleasant to be stared at or pestered with personal questions. But when a new child enters an early years setting, it is going to be important to handle the other children's reactions and the reactions of their parents in a sensitive manner.

Looking is natural when someone new arrives. We look more and look for longer when someone looks unusual. It cannot be prevented. It is often called staring and sometimes people try to stop children doing it.

But making friends begins with looking and being looked at. The other children are likely to look carefully, perhaps with surprise and interest. Some may reach out and touch the new child's distinguishing mark or feature. Others may ask a question. If these expressions of interest and visual

contact are discouraged, the child with a visible difference is at risk of finding it harder in the long run to join in and make friends.

## 2 LOOKING AT YOUR OWN FEELINGS AND BELIEFS...

Anyone encountering a person who has a visible difference can experience many different reactions, especially when it is a child who has a condition, injury or illness which affects the way they look. But being very busy in a demanding early years setting you may not have time to pause and fully register your own reactions when you meet the new child who has a visible difference.

Find time to check yourself out. You may feel embarrassed, shocked, upset, angry, vulnerable, repulsed, or touched with pity by a child whose appearance is unusual. Recognising your own feelings and beliefs about appearance and visible difference will help you to support the child better. All your colleagues will need to do this too. These feelings are often due to our own unconscious or implicit biases. We all have unconscious or implicit biases which are due to our experiences and backgrounds. While we may not be able to control our initial reactions, we can control our responses. Also, if we are aware that a child with a visible difference makes us feel uncomfortable, it is important to recognise this, so that we realise that the problem is with our own reaction to the child and not the child him/herself. [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?

...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 child, 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.

## 3 PREPARING STAFF FOR THE NEW CHALLENGE

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

As explained in the *Introduction* to all the *Guides*, the Equality Act 2010 lays down two key duties for early years providers. These are:

- not to treat a disabled child less favourably
- to make reasonable adjustments for disabled children

Not all children who have a visible difference will be disabled however a failure to comply may amount to unlawful discrimination. All your early years staff, including parents who help, will need to understand the social needs of a child with a visible difference. All staff have an important part to

play in ensuring that everyone becomes comfortable and confident about looking different so that the child is not treated less favourably than a child would be who did not have a visible difference.

#### 4 SHARING INFORMATION

##### ...about the child

Before the new child starts, run an information session, perhaps as part of a general staff meeting. You will have collected the information you need about the new child and the condition, injury or illness that affects the way he/she looks. It is essential to prepare information for colleagues in collaboration with the parents/carers so that no information is passed on without their full consent, using words and language acceptable to the family.

Through your usual pre-admission meeting(s) with the new child and your skills of observation and assessment, you will also have information to be shared with colleagues concerning his/her development, strengths and needs, both educationally and socially (as for any new child joining your early years setting).

##### ... about the social effects of appearance and visible difference

All staff will need to gain awareness of the ways in which everyone's reactions to the new child's visible difference may have impacted the new child's development. Ensuring that everyone understands what to say and do about such behaviours as staring, curiosity, touching and asking questions will help to ensure that the new child can enjoy all their new play and learning activities and become socially confident.

##### ...about common pitfalls

As well as the issues around staring discussed in this guide, there are some other well intentioned interventions which need to be carefully checked.

- It can seem helpful to say that a child is "...just the same as everyone else," perhaps meaning that he/she needs the same interesting and enjoyable learning and social experiences as everyone else. However, you risk losing credibility with both children and adults, who will all, sooner or later, notice this particular child's visible difference.
- "It's the inside that counts" is another well-meant attempt to smooth the path for a child with a visible difference. Of course the inside counts, but the outside, the way we look, counts too. If you avoid referring to appearance you may create problems for the future.
- Social media, film and television emphasise 'image', but even without this emphasis it is very human to notice people's appearances and differences, especially faces. People who look different have to work with this, they cannot pretend it isn't so.
- The child who looks different will come to know that he/she is being noticed all the time, and yet no one ever says a word about it. You risk undermining his/her experience if his/her appearance is not to be mentioned.
- The child concerned may at times be worried or interested in what has happened to him/her or in how he/she looks. If you and other adults make a rule that appearance is not to be spoken of, it will discourage him/her from talking to you about this.
- In social media, in films, on television and in books, characters are sometimes described and perhaps judged in terms of their appearance. If the child who has a visible difference and the other children have not been allowed to talk about appearance and difference, the fictional book or film may become a substitute reality for them.

#### 4 ANSWERING CHILDREN'S QUESTIONS

It is important to recognise that young children constantly ask questions about everything. The questions they ask about another child's appearance are just a part of their huge curiosity about the world. Commonly asked questions include:

- Why is her face like that?
- What happened to his hand?
- Can I catch it?
- Does it hurt?
- Will it go away?

Even if the curious child does not speak their question aloud, but looks closely or reaches out to touch, it will be best to treat their interest as a question. A brief and straightforward answer will satisfy most young children. For example:

- That's just the way Chloe's face is.
- Danny has a scar. He was hurt but he is okay now.
- Muna has one ear like yours and one folded up ear.
- Jess has a pink mark on her face since she was a baby.
- You can't catch it.
- When it gets sore we put cream on it.

Then you can move the conversation on in a natural and appropriate way. For example, "Raj has a big eye and a small eye. His eyes are brown. What colour are your eyes?"

For more about responding effectively to children's curiosity about difference, see the [Guide on Having something to say](#).

#### 5 ANSWERING PARENTS'/CARERS' QUESTIONS

It is important to be prepared for parents/carers of other children to also ask questions and to have concerns about the child with a visible difference. As a staff team, you might want to think about how to deal with this. One useful strategy is for the child's parents/carers to prepare some information about their child that can be shared. Some parents/carers prepare book bag letters – you can find out more here.

[Getting Ready For School Or Nursery With Visible Difference \(changingfaces.org.uk\)](http://changingfaces.org.uk)

Finally, if you need help with any of the things discussed here, make sure you ask for help. Be prepared to make mistakes and ensure that the child and their parents/carers are involved in any decision making. Remember that co-production of any strategies or interventions are much more likely to work and that parents/carers will appreciate your honesty if you find there are challenges along the way.