

GUIDE 8. SELF-EXPRESSION

From a very early age, infants start to produce a range of facial expressions. The infant's capacity to engage with and respond to facial expression, tone of voice and pitch precedes the development of speech and language.

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

It may be useful to get some information from the parents/carers and the child about any challenges with making facial expressions and any concerns they have. If necessary, seek support from appropriate professionals to find out more about the child's specific needs. This guide provides some ideas, but these may need to be adapted to meet the needs of your child if they have a facial visible difference.

1 FACIAL EXPRESSION AND VISIBLE DIFFERENCE

A child with a visible difference may experience difficulties in developing skills of expression if any of the following apply:

- They habitually avoids others' gaze – looking down or keeping their face averted.
- Their face cannot readily make the subtle movements involved in facial expression, because of unusual bone structure, paralysis, or lack of flexibility of the skin, for example.
- They have been encouraged to 'be brave' during painful medical procedures such as changing dressings on burns – lack of expression may have been rewarded.
- Other people may simply not pay enough attention to what the child is communicating non-verbally. Others may over-focus on the visible difference and fail to see the child more fully. Or if they have been told not to stare, they may avoid looking at the child.

2 OBSERVING INTERACTIONS

Your work with the child places you in a good position to make careful observations in different situations. Watch for facial expression, gesture, body language and use of voice. Useful situations to observe include:

- listening to stories, watching films or TV programmes designed for children
- singing, especially songs with actions
- undertaking a task that requires concentration
- joining in an activity that requires taking turns or co-operation with others
- playing, role-play.

Does the child show expressions of pleasure, enthusiasm, excitement, reluctance, frustration, impatience, irritation, anger, happiness, delight, sadness, hurt, fear, anxiety? Are the child's feelings conveyed to other children or to adults?

From your observations, see above, you will have a fair idea whether the child you are working with needs extra help and practice to develop their ability to communicate through facial expressions, gesture, body-language, and aspects of speech and language.

3 HELPING A CHILD TO COMMUNICATE MORE EFFECTIVELY

All children benefit from

- having feelings named and acknowledged

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- learning to distinguish between different feelings – upset, hungry, hurt
- seeing feelings expressed and managed appropriately.

A child with a visible difference will often benefit particularly from extra work on this.

Identifying and naming feelings

Pay close attention to the child who has a visible difference so that you are aware of what is going on for them and how they may be feeling about it. Talk to the child about this:

“Rachel, you look a bit annoyed. Is there something that has annoyed you?”

Be prepared to reflect back to the child their own expression, emphasising facial expression, gesture and voice tone, to acknowledge what they are trying to communicate.

Practising self-expression

A range of ordinary activities can be used to explore and practice all kinds of facial expressions, gestures, body language and voice tone. All young children can benefit from (and enjoy!) opportunities to notice and interpret other people's expressive communications and to try out different expressions of their own. You should decide whether the activities are appropriate for your child to help them increase their range of expression and monitor their progress. You can also identify whether there is a need for further one-to-one work.

If you decide to plan activities for your whole class, it can be helpful to have identified the words and phrases you will use to describe all the variations in expression, gesture, body language and voice tone which you expect to work with in the activity.

Activity 1

Look at cartoon films with the children. Try running a short sequence of film without any sound. Pinocchio works well – there are fewer facial expressions to give clues and so concentration on gesture is easier.

Ask the children to work out what is happening by watching the actions of the characters. Be prepared to model some observations.

“He is waving his arms so they will see him.”

“Do you think that they have seen him? How do you know?”

Activity 2

Use poems and rhymes and repeat the verses in different tones of voice and with different gestures. The scarecrow song is an example.

When all the cows were sleeping and the sun had gone to bed (said softly, keeping very still)
Up jumped a scarecrow and this is what he said (said much more loudly, waving arms).....

Activity 3

Drama, movement and games activities can all be used to enable children to experience and respond to ways of communicating through movement.

Use activities that employ different scales of expression.

- Use hands only to gesture – beckoning, directing, agreeing, warning
- Make big gestures using head/eyes and hands – beckoning, directing, agreeing, warning

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- Try out different 'body language' using the whole body – wide stance with head held high, feet turned in with head drooping
- Walk slowly over a crash mat and then run over the same mat. Going slowly, you can feel your feet sink in, going fast you feel yourself bounce.

If the children take turns some will be able to watch while the others move and gesture. Invite the children to repeat the actions at different strengths so that they can feel from the inside and see from the outside how size and emphasis can change the outcome.

Activity 4

Most young children enjoy role-plays or pretend games. Give the children different costumes and props to choose from. You can then suggest all sorts of scenes and short stories which the children can create in play. Shops, family life, and hospitals are often popular scenarios, and can provide opportunities to set things in train for a wide range of social interactions and associated feelings to emerge.

Ask for comments on what the characters might be feeling and thinking.

'Here is the shopkeeper. He looks puzzled.'

'Here is the mum. She looks happy'

Through close observation and one-to-one work with a child who has a visible difference, you will be able to assess their progress in both knowing and showing what they are feeling, and in noticing and understanding how others may be feeling. If appropriate, you should discuss your observations and concerns with a specialist, such as a speech and language therapist, audiologist, child psychologist.