

Talking with your child

Parent guides



**CHANGING
FACES**

As your child grows up and reaches different stages, you may be thinking about how to talk with them appropriately about looking different and how to handle others people's reactions to their appearance, as well as how to help them with their feelings. You may be encouraging your older child to move confidently from primary to secondary school.

This guide aims to:

- Look at practical ways to talk with your child openly about their own appearance.**

At every stage of development you can prepare and support your child. Talking with your child about their condition and with other people can help build your child's confidence and may also help you to help you also feel more positive about the future and their ability to cope.

One father's experience:

“Changing Faces guided us on how to communicate with Daisy when she lost her hair (aged 6). We are now able to talk more openly about all family issues or things that might worry her.”

Contents

Why is it important to talk with your child?	4
Talking tips	5
Talking with your baby	6
Your feelings	7
Responding to your child's feelings	8
Summary	10

Why is it important to talk with your child?

Children naturally become aware of and curious about difference and often ask 'why' questions. Talking about your child's appearance openly demonstrates you are comfortable with how they look and means that your child grows up without disfigurement becoming a taboo subject. Talking also prepares your child to handle people's natural curiosity with confidence.

Talking with your child positively about their condition and appearance, along with other aspects of how they look, and their qualities and skills will help them to see themselves as a whole in a positive way and help them to cope with life's challenges. It will also help them to deal with any worries they may have.

Giving your child clear and honest information from the beginning will help them to build up a tool box of different explanations which they can use to respond to questions and comments from others, particularly when they begin to be more independent, start school, go to friends' houses etc. For more information see the guide [Building confidence](#).

Familiarity with the language of appearance and difference will help your child to talk about themselves with other people. Your openness will also encourage your child to talk to you about any problems they are having as they grow older.

Talking tips

- **It's not just what you say, but how you say it!** How you talk with your child can be just as important as the words you use. Having a calm, comfortable and matter of fact manner with your child will be reassuring and provide a positive example for them to follow.
- **Don't wait for your child to ask about their face or part of their body.** Talk about it as you would talk about anything else that belongs to them.
- **Simple explanations** can work best. You might want to start by just giving your child's difference a name, e.g. *"it's a birthmark"*, or *"it's your small ear"*. When you are talking about your child's difference you might want to think about using words which describe colours, shapes, and textures, such as pale, brown, red, raised, smooth etc. For more information see the guide [Building confidence](#) - 'The DESCRIPTION' tool.
- **You can talk together as a family** to find words and sentences that everyone feels comfortable using, and if your child is old enough you can sit down together and choose what to say. Here are some things you might say to your child:

"Your skin is red and bumpy. It's a scar from where the hot water fell on you"

"You were born with Moebius Syndrome. I can't see your smile but I can hear it in your excited giggles"

Here are some things your child might like to say:

"I was born with a hole in my mouth. It is called a cleft palate"

"I was born with a purple mark over my eye and cheek. It is called a port wine stain"

- **Using the medical name for your child's condition** may help your child to understand and feel confident about it and be able to use the terms in the future when explaining to others. You can use the medical names alongside the simple explanations.
- **Children don't need to know everything at once.** You can decide how much is appropriate to tell them and at what age.

- **Describing what your child can and cannot do** can help your child to feel more confident and assured, and less likely to believe people who may assume they have limited ability because of the way they look. Your child will then feel more in control. As your child grows, you can give more detailed explanations. Here are some examples:

“Your hand cannot grip things. This means you do most things with one hand”

“You were born with a head that is a different shape to other children. That is all that is different. You enjoy playing and having fun just like your friends”

- **Including brothers and sisters in explanations** helps them to accept their sibling’s appearance, understand the condition and feel confident about answering questions they may be asked.
- **Talking about your child’s strengths and skills** and how they are similar to other children too will make them feel good. If a child hears positive things about their appearance, disfigurement, personality, and abilities they will develop a well-rounded self-image and know that they are worthwhile.
- **In describing appearance**, the aim is to help your child understand that one thing is not necessarily better than the other, just because the two things are different.
- **Even if your child has communication problems** it is still important to acknowledge your child’s appearance with them, in a clear, simple way they can understand.

Talking with your baby

Talking with your baby about difference can be started early, through everyday activities such as bath time, bedtime, games, toys, picture books, and looking in mirrors. This means your baby will pick up early on that it is okay to talk about their appearance. When pointing out their eyes, ears, nose etc. you can add descriptions about other features, for example their small ear or birthmark. You can also use the medical name of their condition too.

Your feelings

You may find yourself feeling angry, sad or just tired from having to deal with other people's reactions. Sometimes you may want to protect your child by keeping your emotions to yourself. At other times you might want to acknowledge your feelings and show your child how to deal with the situation. Here are some examples:

"I feel angry when people stare, or make unkind comments about your eyes. I would prefer they asked nicely or left us alone".

"When I feel like this, I like to have a chat with a friend. Do you want a chat or a cuddle?"

You might find yourself wanting to protect your child by avoiding public places where people might stare or comment. However understandable this is, your child will come across these reactions at some time. It may be more helpful to your child to acknowledge the situation and talk with them about how they might be feeling (angry? sad? upset?); how they might express this (silently looking down? crying? saying things back?); and what might help them to start to feel better.

Talking about your child's appearance is not always easy. Sometimes your own feelings can get in the way and make it harder for you to carry out some of the ideas in this guide. If this is difficult for you, speak to one of our practitioners who can offer you emotional support, or put you in touch with other organisations and support services. They will listen to the unique situation you are in and offer further advice and information.

Learning strategies and responses to cope with people staring and comments will help build both your own and your child's confidence and resilience. Your child will learn from watching you manage people's reactions in a confident and positive way. Again, it is likely to be useful to talk openly and honestly with your child about other people and their behaviour towards a different appearance. There is a lot more information on dealing with other people's reactions in [You and your child](#) and [Communicating with confidence](#).

Responding to your child's feelings

Your child may want to talk about their feelings - or sometimes they may not. Either way, when dealing with difficult feelings, they will probably want you to try to pick up on these and understand how they feel.

Your child may want to express their feelings in a negative way, e.g. *'I hate my nose.'* *'My scar is ugly.'* Depending on the situation and your child, there are different ways you could consider responding.

- It may be good to try and offer a balanced response, by accepting their feelings and at the same time asking what they do like about themselves. For example, *'I know you feel your nose looks really different and that is hard for you sometimes.'* Followed by, *'Look how long your hair is getting – you said you wanted to grow it.'* This helps your child to deal with the frustrations they may feel about their disfigurement, but also gives them a chance to realise that this is only one part of them.
- Another suggestion is to ask them more questions and discuss their feelings by encouraging your child to expand on their comment and why they said it.
- If your child seems reluctant to talk about how they feel, you may like to let them know it is okay for them to talk when they are ready. This can be done by acknowledging situations that happen and showing them you understand it might be difficult for them. For example, *'I'm sure Joey's friend didn't mean to point at your face like that, but I can see how that was a hard thing for you to deal with. Do you want to talk to me about it?'* or *'I know things can be upsetting sometimes. You can talk to me anytime you want to.'*

Try to avoid reassurances that may dismiss or undervalue a child's feelings. Saying things like *"it looks fine"* or *"it's the inside that counts"* are often well-meant responses said by many parents (or others) to smooth the path for their child. Of course, the inside does count, but the outside, the way we look, counts too. It is profoundly human to notice other people's appearance and differences, especially faces. Children with a visible difference need to understand this is the case – and need to find a way to cope with it. If a parent avoids referring to a child's appearance or dismisses these concerns, this may create problems for the child in accepting this and dealing with it.

It is good to be aware that other people may sometimes misread the feelings of a child with a visible difference, particularly if it affects their facial muscles and ability to show emotions. If your child learns to recognise and express their feelings, they can help others to understand them.

Summary

- At every stage of development you can prepare and support your child
- Children naturally become aware of difference
- Give clear and honest information
- Don't wait for your child to ask about their condition
- Talk together as a family
- Be aware of your feelings
- Speak to one of our practitioners who can offer you support

Supporting and advising

Changing Faces offers information, advice and support to children, parents and adults with scars, marks or conditions that affect their appearance.

Informing

We work to improve policy and practice in organisations. Through staff training and consultancy we help to create fair and inclusive environments.

Campaigning

We campaign for social change. We aim to promote a society in which people are treated fairly and equally.

Changing Faces
The Squire Centre
33-37 University Street
London WC1E 6JN

Telephone 0845 4500 275
Fax 0845 4500 276

Support Service Helpline 0300 012 0275

info@changingfaces.org.uk

www.changingfaces.org.uk

Registered Charity No. 1011222
Charity registered in Scotland SC039725
Company Limited by Guarantee.
Registered in England and Wales No 2710440

This guide is also available, on request, in plain text and on CD

© Changing Faces, January 2014

Please contact Changing Faces for further details of sources used.

Review date: January 2017



**CHANGING
FACES**



The Information Standard

Certified
Member