

Preparing Your Child for Social Situations

The goal for all parents is to nurture their children so that they have a positive sense of self and ultimately make a contribution to their community. To achieve this goal parents need to build self-esteem and confidence in their children. We know that children with facial differences may require additional skills to deal with the special situations that they face, and this factsheet provides basic advice about cultivating these skills.

Identifying the Condition

As your child grows, it will be important for him or her to understand the facial condition and be able to share information about it with others, particularly when you are not there. Preparing for social interaction begins at a very early age through your example as a parent. Your child will learn how to answer questions about his or her condition by watching the ways in which *you* respond to people. It is important for you to think about the message you want to give to your child. There will be days when you feel able to educate others through a simple explanation of your child's condition, and there will be days when you are less patient or do not have the emotional strength to deal with others' questions. It is important to have responses prepared for both situations.

When preparing responses, find words to describe your child's condition that are truthful and appropriate to your child's age. Remember that your child will be listening to what you say. For example, a simple statement that a cleft lip scar is from a "hole in my child's lip when he was born" may be sufficient when your child is young. As school

age approaches, your child can and should learn the proper terms associated with his or her condition. This knowledge provides your child with self-confidence based on an ability to respond to and educate others. It is important that your child have a positive statement to give to avoid feeling awkward, embarrassed, or uncomfortable. Being prepared to answer questions removes the element of surprise and makes social experiences easier.

Knowledge of Personal History

Children need to have a sense of their personal history. Making photographs available to your child as part of the family photo album is a critical part of helping your child accept his or her history as "normal." Children love to look at their baby pictures; these photos will document the changes in your child's appearance that have occurred with growth. Allowing your child access to the family album will provide opportunities for discussion in a non-threatening atmosphere in which your child can ask questions about his or her condition. By including all your child's photos, you can show your child that you are proud of who he or she is.

Handling Negative Social Interactions: All children are teased for something at some time in their lives. The only difference is what they are teased about! Parents often become angry with children who tease and may want to confront their parents. Before taking action, however, it is a good idea to ask your child how he or she wants to handle the situation.



Allow your child to express his or her feelings to you. Questions to consider with your child include the following: Who did the teasing? Was it a friend, an acquaintance, a stranger, or a school bully? What was your child teased about? Was it a mean comment, a joke that went bad, or a remark based on a lack of understanding?

After looking at these factors, you and your child can decide how to respond to future encounters. Some choices include making a good-natured joke, providing information, or turning away from the person doing the teasing and actively engaging in positive interaction with other peers or friends. Whatever the response, your child should do it with confidence *reflected in body language and tone of voice*. Parents can practice these strategies with their child. However, if teasing continues to be a concern, it may be helpful to involve the other children's parents, a teacher, or a health care professional. Seek guidance from the professionals on your child's craniofacial team, who will be able to provide information specific to your child's situation which is beyond the scope of this booklet.

Networking with Others

Many families have found that talking with others who are dealing with similar situations is a very empowering and educational experience. Your child's team coordinator or other support organizations like the Cleft Palate Foundation or AboutFace (888.486.1209) may be able to refer you to other resources or help you identify other families who would be interested in talking with you.

For further information on cleft lip and palate, or for a referral to a cleft palate/craniofacial team, please contact:

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