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3-6 YEARS. GUIDES FOR PARENTS

Guide to meeting people and joining in

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Your child is growing up, becoming more independent and learning to communicate her feelings, wishes and experiences. Playing and interacting with her peers is essential to her development. Getting out and encouraging this when your child has a visible difference can feel difficult, but it is through play that children learn social rules like taking turns, how to introduce themselves and how to make friends. It is also through play that children can practise new physical skills e.g. climbing, throwing, painting and learn more about their world.

Self-esteem is also shaped through interaction with others. If children constantly experience difficulties, due to other people's reactions, it can make it harder for them to enjoy being with other children or to gain as much as they should from their early years and play activities. If they have one positive experience, then they are more likely to expect a positive result the next time and feel more confident in themselves.

Meeting new people is also of benefit to you. Although you may have some unique experiences, it can make a real difference to feel supported by other parents, who understand the ins-and-outs of being a Mum or Dad.

This guide offers strategies and suggestions for responding to people's curiosity and encouraging your child to forge friendships. Some of these ideas are based on the Explain-Reassure-Distract technique which many families tell us has given them renewed confidence in meeting new meeting people and helping their child to join in.

1 HANDLING OTHER PEOPLE'S REACTIONS

Going anywhere in public involves being around people who may notice your child's visible difference. It is normal for people to notice difference. We all do it.

Young children are incredibly curious. They look intently at things and ask very straightforward questions. Adults might stare at your child or do a double-take. They may forget to say, 'hello' and instead blurt out, "What happened to your child?" or ask someone with them, "Did you see that child?" Some people are genuinely concerned. Others may be familiar with your child's condition and may want to offer support or a friendly word.

Parents often report feeling completely unprepared to deal with this sort of curiosity, which may create feelings of sadness or anger or anxiety. The **EXPLAIN-REASSURE-DISTRACT** technique enables you to:

- Make the first move
- Act in a way that makes you feel more in control
- Resolve any curiosity
- Maintain your child's self-esteem and self-confidence
- Model for your child how to respond to such curiosity so that she can increase her own skills in meeting new people.

The Explain-Reassure-Distract technique

The general rule of thumb is, the more the interaction means to you, the more you expand the technique.

- Scenario 1
If you are aware that other adults or children have noticed your child's CMN whilst you are at the checkout waiting to pay, walking down the street waiting at the bus stop, there is no need to give in-depth, lengthy explanations.

Try smiling or simply saying "hello" to reassure people or to break a stare. Some people will ask questions and a brief and straightforward answer will satisfy most people allowing you and your child to get on with the day.

- Scenario 2
When you want to make friends with other parents at the school gate or help your child to meet others at his football club, it may mean that you both want to explain his difference in more detail.

A little more information lets people know that your child is just like any other. You can then distract them by talking about something other than your child's appearance.

Here are some examples of the different ways you can put the technique together and explain, reassure and distract (move the conversation on).

EXAMPLES

- "It's just a birthmark."
- "Tom was born with CMN. It means he has a large birthmark."
- "I have a large mole. It is brown, lumpy and hairy but it doesn't hurt."
- "Molly's face looks different. That's all. She likes football just like you."

- Scenario 3
Other children's comments or reactions can feel particularly difficult to handle especially if they ask awkward questions or come straight up and touch your child's unusual feature.

Your child will be interacting with other children on a daily basis at nursery or school so the way that you respond to other children will help her to learn how manage their reactions herself.

EXAMPLES

- This is Matthew. He has a special mark but you can't catch it. What is your name?
- It's just a brown mark by her eye. It doesn't hurt. Do you want to go on the swings together?
- Daisy has a large mole. It makes her skin itchy, but you can't catch it. Maybe you and Daisy can draw a picture together?

- Scenario 4
There will be times when you don't feel up to responding to others. Try using the 'Distract' part of the technique by asking them a question about themselves or moving the conversation on.

EXAMPLES

- "I don't feel like talking about it right now. I'll tell you about it another time. Did you go to the fair on the weekend?"
- "It's a birthmark. Sorry we can't chat. Got to get to an appointment. Bye."

- Scenario 5
Bear in mind some of the other things that people might be thinking about your child – is his CMN contagious? They may assume that a child with a visible difference must need extra help or have delays in talking or development.

Although some children may need extra support or have learning difficulties it is not always the case, so by expanding the **EXPLAIN – REASSURE – DISTRACT** technique you can reassure people and clear up any misconceptions.

EXAMPLES

- Daniel's was born with a large birthmark. It's not contagious and he can still do everything the other children can do.

2 MANAGING RUDENESS

Some people are rude, have made assumptions or don't know how to respond appropriately to a difference in appearance. Being assertive - stating what you feel and want without getting angry or abusive can be a very empowering way of dealing with this.

It is important to teach your child to be confident in managing other people's reactions, but if someone is rude or upsetting, she needs to know that it is OK to walk away and to tell you or a teacher later.

WHAT TO SAY IF SOMEONE IS RUDE ABOUT YOUR CHILD'S APPEARANCE

- "My son's face has a CMN on it. It was present when he was born. We don't like it when people stare. We would prefer you to say hello or ask us a question if you are curious."
- "My child has CMN. He may look different but he can hear and what you said really hurts."

WHAT YOUR CHILD SHOULD DO IF SOMEONE IS RUDE TO HIM ABOUT HIS APPEARANCE

- Walk away and tell a parent or teacher
- Say "Excuse me. I have to go now. My Mum is waiting for me"
- If it is a friend or someone your child normally gets on with he could say,

“What you said really hurt. They are just moles from birth.”

3 YOU DON'T HAVE TO EXPLAIN ALL THE TIME

The suggestions above may feel hard to put into practice but parents often remark how the more they use the strategies, the more confident they feel and the more they enjoy going out. Sometimes, just thinking through your options with someone close to you and coming up with some ways to handle situations can help you to feel more in control and able to enjoy spending time with your child.

Look after yourself

However, you are not expected to find a way to manage every situation. Take it one step at a time. Some days will be better than other days. On good days you may feel like going to the park or shops and be confident in responding to other people. If you have a day when you have found other people's reactions difficult, you may like to do something to calm down or relax e.g. go for a cup of coffee, invite a close friend around or just have a cry on your partner's / friend's shoulder.

Positive self-talk

Sometimes you will have to go out, even if it is not a good day. If you don't want to explain or you need a confidence boost, try having something to say to yourself that will reassure you.

This might seem strange but evidence shows that the more we think and act positively, the more we are likely to feel positive. One of the ways to challenge negative thoughts is through positive self-talk, and the more we do it, the more our brains will start to do this on their own. So, the perfectly natural thought of, “I can't cope anymore!” is challenged by acknowledging the ways that you have coped before, and planning how you will cope next time. Here are some more examples:

- “I will be OK.”
- “We have done this before and we can do it again today.”
- “These are my children and I'm proud of them.”
- “I will ignore those who stare. I will smile and show them that I am OK.”

4 HELPING YOUR CHILD TO JOIN IN

Children of this age, particularly the younger ones, can still need encouragement in playing together. They may have some of the skills (e.g. sharing, turn taking) but they will not remember to do it all the time. It is helpful to suggest how your child can join rather than insisting that he plays with others.

Your child will hear the simple explanations you are using to describe her condition. She will also be watching what you say and do at the park or at playgroup. If you can model the following skills for meeting people, joining in and making friends for your child, she will feel more confident about trying them out for herself.

- Greeting people by name with eye contact

- Introduce your child to others
- Smiling more and making eye contact
- Asking to join in a game that others are already playing
- Asking someone else if they would like to join in with what you are doing
- Suggesting a game or activity
- Starting a new conversation, or changing the subject with a question.

These skills will also be helpful for siblings who may also find social situations tricky as a result of reactions to their brother or sisters appearance.

Maria, 4 years old, is in the playground. Mum points at a child on the slide and says, "What are they doing over there?"

"They are on the slide." says Maria.

"I think it would be fun for you to join in, says mum cheerfully. Maria slowly starts towards the slide. "Off you go," says mum encouragingly as she watches to see if Maria will join in all on her own. Maria stands at the bottom of the slide as the others push past to get on the steps.

Mum walks a little closer and says, "This is Maria. She would like a turn too. Please let her have a go." They let her in and Mum says, "Thank you". As she comes to the bottom of the slide, Mum says, "That was fun. You enjoyed that. Why don't you go have another turn?"

Give your child a chance to talk for herself

You may be used to answering questions about your child's CMN or even pre-empting these by providing an explanation or encouraging children to play together. Your child (and siblings) will be watching and learning how you respond to others. Over time she will become familiar with these simple explanations and when she is ready she can start to use them herself.

You can encourage this by watching closely and giving her a chance to answer questions or respond to stares or comments:

- If another child asks her "what is that?" don't step in with an answer straight away. Keep quiet for a little longer than usual and see if she gives a response.
- If not, you could suggest she answers by saying, "Lilly, do you want to explain?"
- If she doesn't, you can give a brief explanation and then you can encourage them to introduce themselves or play a game together – something to move the encounter on to normal social interaction.

Help your child to find her own explanation

- Sit down with her and discuss the words she likes and dislikes.

- Write down a few things she likes (she needs a variety of response, including an 'explanation' statement and a 'moving the conversation on' statement) and practise them at home
- Let her choose her favourites. She can write these on a card which she keeps in her pocket, pin them up on her bedroom wall or keep them somewhere special and safe.
- When she is comfortable with them let her try them out. Try an easy situation first (e.g. a friend, one person at a time, when you are near by).
- Remind her who she can turn to when things don't go so well or if she feels low.

As your child gets older you can step back more and more and observe how they deal with things. Explaining things in her own way will increase her self-confidence amongst her peers and the sense that looking different is OK.

5 PREPARING FOR NURSERY AND SCHOOL

Getting to know one another and making friends begins with looking and being looked at. Looking is natural when someone new arrives. We look more and look for longer when someone looks unusual. The other children at your child's new nursery or school are likely to look carefully, perhaps with surprise and interest at her. Some may reach out to touch her distinguishing mark or feature. Others may ask a question. If these expressions of interest and visual contact are discouraged, your child is at risk of finding it harder in the long run to join in and make friends.

Equipping your child with an explanation for the way she looks and social skills for joining in and making new friends will stand her in good stead for starting at nursery or school.

It is also essential that all staff members are prepared to handle curiosity from other children, other parents, new staff members so that your child can engage in normal social activities without her difference becoming the main focus of attention.

Set up a meeting with your child's school

Contact the person who will be responsible for looking after your child (this may be the manager of the nursery, the nursery nurse, her keyworker, teacher or the head teacher) and request a meeting well before your child starts school. You need to allow the school enough time to make the necessary preparations and to anticipate any training needs.

It helps to share the following information:

- The name of your child's condition and how it affects them
- Any medical needs that your child has
- Any special needs that your child has
- Examples of how you explain your child's difference (e.g. Marcy's skin is brown and itchy. It's called CMN. You can't catch it.) if people are curious or make a comment.

It helps to ask the following questions:

- How do the teachers plan to deal with any curiosity about your child's appearance
- How do they deal with teasing
- Do they have experience of supporting a child who has a visible difference. How has this child settled in?
- How will the school keep you informed about your child's progress
- Would the school consider training to support a child who has a CMN?

You can also let your child's school or nursery know about the teachers guide *Caring Matters Now Support Group* has available.

What your child's nursery or school needs to do

It is vital for all staff members – including administrative and catering staff – to understand about your child's condition and be aware of the particular social and psychological challenges that having an unusual appearance can present. They also need to know what to say or do when somebody stares, makes a comment or asks a question about your child's appearance.

Before the term begins, make sure your child's school runs an information session for all staff members to explain about your child's condition and also share information concerning her development, strengths and needs, both educationally and socially. This should be done in collaboration with you so that information is shared with your consent. School can contact the *Caring Matters Now Support Group* for any further information.

Teach staff the Explain-Reassure-Distract technique

It is important for all staff members to learn the Explain-Reassure-Distract technique so that they can respond to any curiosity from other children in a natural and straightforward way. It is helpful if you can prepare a list of things that you say so that everyone is using the same simple form of words both in and out of school, for example:

- "That's just the way her face is. Why don't you go and ask her what her name is?"
- "Jess has a mark on her face. We call it a birthmark. It's like a mole only bigger. Have you got any moles too?"

6 SIBLINGS

When a child has a CMN, it affects everyone in the family to some degree. Most siblings cope well when they are supported to understand and accept their brother or sister's difference.

However, they may feel left out when their brother goes to hospital or they may get teased or asked questions about their sister's appearance. It is therefore helpful if siblings can also learn ways of joining in and explaining their brother or sister's difference.

- This is my sister. She's got a birthmark. Do you want to play with us?

- David is my younger brother. He has a giant mole. Do you have a brother too?

It is also important to include siblings in discussions about their brother's visible difference and to set aside time for them to share their feelings and concerns.

7 I'M FINDING IT DIFFICULT

As the parent of a child with a visible difference, there are so many things that can feel strange and overwhelming. At this point in time, you may have other priorities or everything might just feel very busy. If this is the case why don't you put this leaflet down and return to it when it suits you? Focus on what is important right now, give yourself some space and time, and make sure you take care of yourself.

Many parents find it helpful and reassuring to talk to someone who understands the unique situation they are in. It can be liberating to be able to express your feelings openly either on your own or with a partner about having a child who looks different. For example, attending one of the Caring Matters Now family days is a great way to meet other families affected by CMN.

You can get in touch with your regional support contact at *Caring Matters Now Support Group* for more support, information and advice.