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**11-18 YEARS. GUIDES FOR PARENTS**

**Handling adolescence when your child  
has CMN**

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## Handling adolescence when your child has CMN

Adolescence is a time of moving from the immaturity of childhood into the maturity of adulthood. There is no single event or boundary line that denotes the end of childhood or the beginning of adolescence. Rather, experts think of the passage from childhood into and through adolescence as composed of a set of transitions that unfold gradually and that touch upon many aspects of a young person's behaviour, development and relationships.

The leap from childhood to adolescence is generally accepted as monumental not least for the changes the transition heralds in everyone's lives. No one in the family, it would seem, is exempt from the impact that changing from a child to a young person brings.

This guide focuses on a number of issues encountered by all teenagers and their parents. It also offers practical strategies to enable parents to support their child through the additional challenges that growing up with CMN can pose.

### 1. UNDERSTANDING ADOLESCENCE

Adolescence coincides with a psychological breakthrough in a young person's life. The thoughts, ideas and concepts your child develops during this period will greatly influence his future life and play a major role in character and personality formation. It is also a time of rapid physical development, deep emotional changes and notable mood swings. These developments and changes are exciting but can also be equally confusing and uncomfortable for you both.

Adolescence is one of the most, if not the most significant periods of transition in people's lives when the notion of identity becomes of the utmost, albeit bewildering, importance. For young people this is a time of often perplexed questioning such as "Who am I?" "What do I want to be?" and "How do I get there?"

It is also a time when a young person may begin to challenge, doubt and enquire about everything that touches their lives. This may be seen occasionally as defiance, and can be particularly exasperating for parents, who may feel that their adolescent children question everything just for the sake of argument.

As they become more independent, young people want to try out new things, but often recognise that they have little experience to fall back on when things get difficult. At the same time, young people are increasingly aware of how others, especially their peers, see them and they're desperately trying to fit in with the world. This may produce rapid changes in self-confidence and behaviour – feeling very adult one minute, very young and inexperienced the next.

They may express their sense of vulnerability through behaviour rather than obvious distress. You need to be pretty flexible to deal with all this and may feel under considerable strain. At times like these try to remember that this is very normal and a part of 'growing up' – and it will eventually pass!

Young people want recognition of who they are, even if they have no clear idea of what that might be yet. With your support, tolerance and understanding, their growing need for identity and independence can be achieved.

*"It does not matter how many times they tell you that you don't understand and that you can't know how they feel just keep telling them you are there."* A parent.

## **2. APPEARANCE AND IDENTITY**

Adolescence is often a time when appearance and identity can suddenly become inexorably intertwined. Body image or the way they see themselves is a major concern for girls and boys in this age group. Indeed, studies have shown that physical appearance concerns contribute more than any other factor to overall levels of self-esteem in young people.

Some teenagers struggle with their self-esteem when they begin puberty because the body goes through many changes. These changes, combined with a natural desire to feel accepted leads many young people to compare themselves to the people around them or to the 'perfect', airbrushed images of actors and celebrities which they are bombarded with on TV or online, in films and magazines.

The adolescent world that they are now trying hard to fit into may seem to your child to value the appearance rather than the substance of individuals. For young people with a visible difference these concerns may be further augmented sometimes by long held beliefs and doubts about their body image.

Most children have a 'body awareness' even from an early age, but this usually involves comparisons of growth and maturity. There is also an awareness of physical difference with others. Despite living with CMN since birth, this increasing awareness of his 'difference' can have a powerful effect on his self-confidence.

### **Encourage your child to be open about his feelings**

If your child is concerned about his appearance encourage him to speak about his feelings and worries. Create a 'safe place' for him to openly express his doubts, anger and frustrations and show that you are really listening and acknowledging all the issues he is trying to cope with. By not minimising or dismissing his anxieties you will also be acknowledging your recognition of his burgeoning maturity.

### **Offer reassurance**

The need to conform to the 'norm' or to be the same as their peers can at times be overwhelming to a young person. Physical changes to the body can sometimes seem to happen quite quickly and he may need a lot of reassurance, especially if he is not growing or maturing as quickly as his friends.

Reassure your child by explaining that it's normal to be a bit concerned or self-conscious. Remind him that all his peers will also have anxieties and doubts. Also, let him know that everybody is different. There are early bloomers, late arrivers, speedy developers, and slow but steady growers. In other words, there's a wide range of what's considered normal.

*"I keep telling her she will catch up; and not to worry because she will get there in the end."* A parent

### **Be positive about his appearance**

Self-belief and self-value are important factors in overcoming feelings of negativity. Negative statements from your child such as: "I am so ugly!" or "I hate the way I look" can be addressed positively and sensitively by complimenting your child about all their good points as often as you can: "You have the nicest eyes"; "You have a great smile"; "You have really lovely hair"; "You look really fantastic in that outfit."

Try to avoid making well meaning statements such as: "Don't worry darling, it's the inside that counts." Many young people with CMN find this very discounting of their appearance which, like anyone else, matters to them very much indeed. Your child will want to know that you find both his inner qualities and outer appearance attractive to you.

It is also important to help your child make the most of his appearance. Young people may focus only on their CMN areas that they don't like but wearing modern clothes or having a trendy hairstyle will also make them feel more confident.

If your teenager wants to dye his hair, paint his fingernails black, or wear 'unsuitable' clothes, it may be worth thinking twice before you object. Teens want to shock their parents and it's a lot better to let them do something temporary and harmless; leave the objections to things that really matters.

### **Help him to challenge his beliefs about appearance**

Films, TV programmes, magazines articles and advertising encourage the belief that we have to look a certain way in order to be happy and successful. You can help your child to challenge this belief by asking him why he wants to look like a particular person e.g. a Hollywood star.

You will find that often this 'beautiful' person represents a particular dream or a lifestyle that your child believes is unattainable. He may say something along the lines of "Because I want to be in films." Find out more by asking something like, "Are

you interested in acting?” If he says “yes”, you could say something like, “Let’s not wait for Hollywood. Let’s look at how you can fulfil your ambition. Would you like to find out about acting classes?” In this way, your child can begin to understand that dreams can sometimes be achieved by ‘going and getting’ rather than ‘waiting and hoping’.

### **Encourage activities and interests**

Young people with CMN may have feelings of doubt that they will find a place for themselves in the world and their goals may be tempered with thoughts of “I can’t join in that’ or ‘I don’t think I can learn to do that.’

*“Do not allow your child to dwell on what she can’t do, we all have stuff we can’t do, instead encourage her to concentrate on what she can do.”* A parent.

Challenge these negative thoughts or beliefs and support your child’s talents, hopes and desires by encouraging his participation in activities and interests. A positive image of self that includes not only his appearance and his CMN but also an acknowledgement of all his talents and positive personality traits will help your child to feel more self-confident and improve his self-esteem. Remember to remind him of everything he is good at ... dancing ... singing ... cooking ... sport .. impressions.

*“Wherever he wants to go, whatever he wants to try I am always totally enthusiastic, he has just started dance lessons and loves it.”* A parent.

## **3. HELPING YOUR CHILD TO GAIN INDEPENDENCE**

The primary goal of the teen years is usually to achieve independence. For this to occur, ‘teens’ will start pulling away from their parents – especially the parent whom they’re the closest to. You may find that your sweet and loving child who previously had been willing to conform to please you will suddenly begin asserting himself – and his opinions – strongly and rebelling against parental control.

You may also find that you are increasingly embarrassing to your adolescent offspring. Your views, appearance and values may now be scrutinised minutely and often rejected as old-fashioned, out of date and far too conventional.

These rejections and conflicts are usually not to do with your personalities, but simply arise from the fact that you are ‘the parents’ from whom your children must become independent if they are to have their own life.

However, it is understandable to feel rejected so it may help to think back to your own adolescent years. Can you remember your struggles with how you looked, how you felt, how you related to your parents and the world in general? Are you ready for those changes in your own son or daughter? Are you willing for his opinions and tastes to differ from your own? Parents who are aware of what’s coming can cope better with it.

## **Setting Boundaries**

Parents and teenagers often complain about each other's behaviour. Parents often feel they have lost any sort of control or influence over their child. Adolescents need their parents to be clear and consistent about rules and boundaries, but at the same time may resent any restrictions on their growing freedom and ability to decide for themselves.

Adolescents will often appear unhappy with the expectations their parents place on them. However, they usually understand and need to know that you care enough about them to expect things from them. Appropriate grades, behaviour and adherence to the rules of the house are important standards to maintain. If you have suitable and achievable expectations, your child will usually try to meet them.

Involve your teenage children in making family rules – like all of us, they are more likely to stick to rules if they can see some logic to them and have helped to make them. Parents should pick their battles. A lot of things adolescents do are irritating but not all are worth an argument. It's usually better to spend time on praising good decisions or behaviour. It is an interesting fact that most annoying habits will usually burn themselves out once parents stop reacting to them.

## **Letting go**

Every parent needs to recognise that they need to step back and allow their child to become an adult and sometimes this can only be achieved literally by your child leaving home. Letting go can be particularly hard to do if your child has CMN, his basic need for independence may often be affected by his own feelings of self doubt and uncertainties such as:

- Will I be able to live my own life?
- Will I be able to be who I want to be?
- Will I be able to make my own decisions?

The fine balance needed between being encouraging and realistic about their present capabilities is not always easy. Sometimes what is needed most is a continual presence of encouragement, reassurance and understanding. The temptation to be overprotective is understandable but helping your child to manage independently long-term is the best kind of support and guidance you can give.

## **4. TALKING WITH YOUR CHILD ABOUT CMN**

Young people can often have very real worries, anxieties and fears about their condition. If their condition is not spoken about directly they may begin to wonder why. Sometimes, young people end up feeling very alone and scared to talk about it or they may even think that they have an unusual appearance because they have done something wrong.

If you talk to your child about their CMN with confidence and in a matter of fact way, you can allay such fears before they arise and this in turn will help them to feel more confident and secure.

You will also be providing him with words that he can use to formulate sentences in order to respond to other people's curiosity as well as to express his feelings, thoughts and fears about his CMN.

Most importantly, you are instilling the belief that their difference is OK. A positive image of self that includes not only their CMN but also an acknowledgement of their attractiveness, talents and positive personality traits will help your child to feel confident – particularly in social situations.

Your child has been living with his condition from birth so you may already have established ways of talking about it. The following tips may help you both find ways of talking about his condition:

- Keep it simple and honest
- Use words that describe colour, shape and texture
- Describe how your child's condition does or doesn't affect him
- Use the medical name for his condition (CMN)
- Talk about his similarities to other people and strengths as well as his differences

One of the best ways to ensure that your child feels equipped to deal with other people's reactions when you're not around to help him is also to talk openly and honestly about possible scenarios. Introduce this by saying something like, "I'm wondering what you would like to say if other kids ask you about your birthmark? How would you feel about us looking at some things you could say?"

Your child needs to feel both capable and confident of dealing with awkward and possibly uncomfortable situations but it is best always that he feels in control and at ease with the words he plans to use. Therefore, ask if he would like your help rather than dictate possible responses. "What would you like to say?" is always preferable to "This is what I would say."

When a situation arises, check with him afterwards by saying, "Did that sound OK to you?" The right balance is always to empower your child. Autonomy is continually important but they also need to know that you are there as a constant support and presence.

## **5. MANAGING OTHER PEOPLE'S REACTIONS**

Meeting people in a social setting can be unnerving for many adolescents, but for young people with CMN it can be especially intimidating.

A young person with a visible difference is likely to encounter curiosity in the form of staring or double-takes and sometimes even expressions of shock. It is important to

teach your child how to manage other people's reactions in a positive way and to develop a confident manner especially as he will be doing more and more things outside of the family. Being prepared with responses to comments, questions, staring etc is an important way of helping him to feel in control.

### **1. Make sure your child has something to say**

Make sure your child has clear and honest information about his condition. This will enable him to develop sentences to use when people ask him about his condition, e.g. "I was born with a birthmark. It's no big deal, it doesn't hurt". Encourage him to practise what he wants to say and how to say it at home first with you, with his siblings or even with the family pet until he feels comfortable saying them in different scenarios.

When he feels more comfortable, he can even take the initiative rather than waiting for other people to say something, e.g. "I see you've noticed my hands. It's a large mole I was born with. They don't hurt at all. How do you know Gemma?"

Remember to praise your child and show your recognition of their growing maturity by saying, "I really loved the way you handled that, well done!"

### **2. Role-modelling**

As a parent, how you handle and manage other people's reactions, not only what you say, but the manner in which you say it will provide an important example to your child. By looking relaxed, confident and at ease you are providing your child with a fundamental model that will help him in his own social interactions.

### **3. Reassure**

Try to reassure your child that one of the main reasons people will look at him is to communicate with him. We all look at people's faces both when we are speaking and when we are listening. It is normal and natural part of communication.

Unfortunately, if your son/daughter is self-conscious about their appearance this apparent examination by others can be uncomfortable and may be thought of as intrusive. It is important to explain that people are naturally curious and that we all tend to seek out and want to know more about anything that is new to us. Young children and newborn babies especially instinctively stare at faces. This is because faces provide information; they tell us the mood and often the unspoken thoughts of the other person.

### **4. Handling rudeness**

Some people are rude, have made assumptions or don't know how to respond appropriately to a difference in appearance. Show your child how to be assertive. Being able to state what he feels and wants without getting



angry or abusive can be a very empowering way for your child to deal with rudeness.

He could say:

- I have CMN – it's a birthmark. I may look different but I can hear and what you said really hurt
- I don't like it when people stare. I would prefer you to say hello or ask me a question if you are curious

Let him know that it is also ok for him to walk away and, if he is at school, to find a teacher.

### **5. Is it all too much for him?**

There will be times when your child does not feel up to responding to others. Let him know that it is ok. He does not have to explain all the time if he doesn't want to. Sometimes it is more important for your child (and for you) to do something to calm down or relax.

At times like this, it may help your child to focus on experiences that have worked well and to try to find positive messages that he can say to himself to challenge the negative thoughts that may pop up when he meets new people. A little further on in this Guide you will find a list of positive self-mottos which many young people with visible differences have found helpful.

## **6. THE IMPORTANCE OF FRIENDS**

Although close relations with friends exist well before adolescence, during the teenage years they change in significance and structure. There is a sense of real camaraderie, a total understanding of one another's feelings, hopes and fears. For the first time there is also a feeling of it is 'us against them' and an acknowledgement of the divide between the generations. At this point, your child may consider his friends to be more important and influential than his family.

These relationships are important as they are part of learning how to get on with other people and gaining a sense of identity that is distinct from that of the family. However, fears of being in the 'right' group as opposed to the 'wrong' group can bring new pressures when wanting to belong and be accepted seems to be so important.

*"With my friends we talk about the same things; I can't do that at home."* A 15 year old.

*"He talks to his friends all the time, but if I ask him anything I'm lucky if I get a grunt back."* A parent.

Young people with CMN may have lots in common with their peers but they can often feel left out and unsure of themselves, particularly if attention is focussed only on aesthetics and outward appearances.

*“Now she’s a young teenager, there are times when she feels that she doesn’t care what strangers think and I am very proud of her but it’s a difficult age among her peers, when her look isn’t ‘cool’. We now talk about how her ‘friends’ attitudes should improve as they get older.” A parent*

It is now more important than ever to encourage your child to engage with the world at large. Support him in broadening his social activities, trying new hobbies and make sure your home has an ‘open door policy’ to friends and foes alike. Home needs to represent safety, love and affection to your child but it must not become a haven against the world. Rather, the world should be ever-present and welcomed in.

Ensure that outings take place in young people’s venues such as bowling alleys, tennis clubs, paintballing centres, activity centres, skating rinks, etc. Invite classmates along; make the activities fun and memorable. Investigate drama clubs, youth groups and dance classes where your child can meet new friends with a shared interest.

## **7. BULLYING**

Be aware that adolescence is often a period when bullying, especially from their peers, becomes a problem in many teenagers’ lives. Finding out that your child is being bullied is a stressful and distressing experience and it is natural for you to feel anger, confusion or even guilt. Some children are good at hiding their feelings and the first you may know of the problem is when your child suddenly doesn’t want to go to school.

If you are concerned that your child is being bullied, you could introduce the subject into the conversation by talking about the sad reality of the prevalence of bullying. Ask him tactfully if he has encountered any such problems and if so what happened and how he felt. Discuss with your child the reasons why bullying exists, i.e. Bullies are always cowards, generally with low self-esteem who only feel important when they are victimising others. Bullying should always be addressed and help sought if necessary to deal with it.

Bullying thrives on secrecy and silence. Ask your child’s school about their ‘Anti-Bullying’ policy and together with your child begin to look at how they want to handle any potential bullying. Start building a positive language e.g. “You are the one with the problem not me.” “I am not talking to you or listening to you.”

## **8. BOYFRIENDS AND GIRLFRIENDS**

The confusing state of adolescence is further and irrevocably complicated by the arrival in their lives of the opposite sex. Boys/girls who had been judged for years as nuisances by your child suddenly become objects of desire and/or unrequited love. “No-one is ever going to love me” is now added to the list of deepest woes.

Young people are much more peer-orientated and often find themselves subject to a new feedback system that works on their sense of identity. The way they feel about

themselves is often determined by how people respond to them, i.e. If they respond with love, I feel lovable. If the response is one of exclusion I feel unlovable.

Your child's sense of self-worth becomes ever more determined by the opinions and accomplishments or failures of others. For young people with CMN there is often an added anguish and a yearning to look the same as their peers. "She is beautiful, that's why she's got a boyfriend, it's never going to happen to me" Or "He is tall and good-looking that's why he has got a girl-friend, it's never going to happen to me."

These statements can be very difficult for parents to hear. There are no easy answers and wanting to fit in can be very painful. Continue to reassure your child that there will be boys/girls who will look at them and see them for the wonderful person that they are. Reiterate that other people's reactions to us are greatly influenced by how we present ourselves. Appearing to be friendly, approachable and interesting are key elements in the success of any new encounter.

During this time, your child will be ever more intently aware of the attitude you as a parent are taking so it is important that you continually re-affirm an optimistic message by being positive, hopeful and constructive.

*"Try to find more opportunities for your child to mix with other children with similar difficulties so that she remembers there are others having to cope and they too are worrying if they'll ever find someone to date or marry."* A parent.

Young people who have CMN often have a huge anxiety about what will happen when they ever do find a boy/girlfriend. They may worry about how to talk about their condition or how to explain that their skin condition.

If you think your child may be worried about any of these or similar issues then ask him sensitively if he would like to talk about his concerns. Reassure him there are always practical solutions and it may just take a bit of practice or trial and error to find what works best for him.

## 9. POSITIVE SELF TALK

- Give your child and yourself a confidence boost by having something reassuring to say to yourselves
- I will be ok
- I have done this before and I can do it again.
- I will ignore those who stare. I will smile and show them I'm ok.
- I will spend time with people who treat me well and make me feel good about myself.
- I just have to be myself. That is all I have to be.
- I'm happy with who I am. I don't need to measure myself against others.
- Think about the things you want in your life and set goals to achieve them.
- If you're good at something and enjoy it, keep doing it. Develop your talents and share them with others.

- Don't assume people are unfriendly, they may just be wondering how to approach me. I will smile and say hello.
- I am amazing and my family is very proud of me.
- I'm proud of myself and my achievements.

## 10. SIBLINGS

Sibling rivalry increases when children feel they are getting unequal amounts of their parents' time and attention. For parents of a teenager with CMN, the amount of time taken by medical commitments may be considerable and this can sometimes be resented by other members of the family especially siblings.

Your child's siblings may also be asked questions about their brother/sister's appearance. It is therefore helpful if siblings can also learn ways of explaining their brother/sister's condition.

Wanting to be like their brother or sister can also be overwhelming sometimes for a teenager with CMN. "Why can't I be like her/him?" will repeatedly be both thought and said during these times. Jealousy and resentment can often be more prevalent during the adolescent years as your child struggles with feelings of uncertainty and self-confidence.

Siblings of a child with CMN may also have issues about "why them and not me?" similar in many ways to 'survivor guilt' when there is sometimes an overwhelming feeling of not deserving to escape unscathed. His siblings may even have concerns about the genetic basis of the condition and the implications on their own future children.

Encourage all of your children to speak about any feelings of anxiety or apprehension. By exploring and acknowledging that such feelings are normal and valid, your family will be better able to communicate with one another.

## 11. FINDING FURTHER SUPPORT FOR YOU

Being the parent of a child with CMN can be both challenging and isolating at times and may trigger different emotions at different times. These may vary from feelings of resentment when looking at so called 'normal families' who appear to have no problems or challenges to sometimes being overwhelmed with the testing and difficult circumstances that you and your child may have to cope with. There may be times when you simply feel exhausted. All these feelings are understandable and justified.

At this point in time, you may have other priorities. You may find that your feelings about your child's CMN or experience are on your mind and it is difficult to use the ideas in this Guide. If this is the case, why don't you put it 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.



You may find that you would like extra support and advice or information at various times throughout your child's adolescence. Seeking support can be as simple as talking to a friend or fellow parent who may be going through a similar experience. All parents of teenagers past and present will be able to empathise to some extent with one another. It is an elite club with no fixed rules except those of patience and understanding.

Caring Matters Now can help put parents in touch with one another to share experiences and ideals for managing different situations. Email [info@caringmattersnow.co.uk](mailto:info@caringmattersnow.co.uk).