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**7-11 YEARS. GUIDES FOR PARENTS**

**Guide to making friends and fitting in**

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## Guide to making friends and fitting in

As your child grows up, and becomes more independent, he will be going to activities, parties and friends' houses where he will be interacting with other children. This is a time when children most want to be like their peers and fit in. Children with CMN do have many things in common with other children but they can feel left out and unsure of themselves, particularly if a lot of attention is focused on their appearance by others.

It is likely that your child will start to handle reactions to his appearance on his own. You may feel concerned about this. You will both feel more confident and positive about everyday encounters, if you can learn to handle other people's reactions effectively and then role-model these skills for your child.

Making friends becomes increasingly important for children of this age as they start to develop their view of themselves through interactions with their peers. Being part of a family is a child's first experience of fitting into a group so your child will already have learnt about how to behave with different people.

This Guide explains how you and other adults supervising your child can build his self-esteem whilst helping him handle other people's curiosity and expand his 'friendship' skills within his own peer group. Many of the suggestions are based on the Explain-Reassure-Distract technique which many families tell us has given them renewed confidence in meeting new people and helping their child to forge friendships.

### 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 MAKING FRIENDS AND FITTING IN AT SCHOOL: ABC

Children spend a large part of their lives at school. At this age, socialising and fitting in is very important. They may not appreciate the uniqueness of their unusual hobby, intelligence, skill on the football field or their unusual feature. They may just want to have some friends, get along with others in the school and not stick out from the crowd.

Maximising your child's opportunities for positive social interactions can influence his feelings of self-worth, his ability to forge friendships and do well at school.

#### **Step A: Building self-esteem**

Self-esteem is about feeling good about oneself, knowing that you are loveable and being proud of your strengths, abilities and achievements. Parents and adults who care for a child play an important part in nurturing positive self-esteem by praising them, acknowledging their unique and loveable qualities and supporting their development of social skills and emotional awareness. When a child has positive social experiences, he will internalise feelings of self-worth and he will grow up with a sense of "I'm OK". He will take pride in himself and what he does; he will feel good about himself when he does the right thing. He will stand up for himself, he will understand his feelings and feel confident about who he is.

#### ***Praise your child***

Children flourish when they are praised and when they know that they are loveable and likeable. Be specific in your praise - tell your child exactly what he did that you liked; comment on his strengths, highlight his achievements and positive personality traits. This will help him to understand what it is that you like about him.

#### **EXAMPLE**

- "When you told Sally about your birthmark you spoke so clearly. That made it easier for her to understand. I am proud of you for doing that."
- "I saw you smile and ask that boy to play with you. That was friendly. I see he decided to join you. It looks like you had fun."
- "You are such a good problem solver. When Jo burst into your group of friends and tried to take them away you told her you were upset and that you still wanted to play with them. Inviting her to join in really worked out well."

#### ***Develop your child's awareness of self and others***

Paying more attention to other people and noticing their individual characteristics can help to reduce your child's feelings of being stared at. Encourage him to notice and describe how other children are behaving by asking him particular questions like "What can you see?", "What do the other children like to do?", "What do you think when you see them playing football?", "What do you think they think when you play football?".

Help your child to explore these aspects of himself too. What kinds of things interest him? Is there a game or activity he'd like to try? Help him to see himself as others see him e.g. as someone who is quiet but who likes to laugh or as someone who is good at tidying up.

### **Positive self-talk**

Children who have a CMN may rightly be wary of meeting new children if they have had unpleasant experiences before but the way we think can also influence the way we feel. Research shows that the more positive expectations and thoughts we have, the more we are likely to have positive experiences. Negative past experiences or fears may lead a child to think, "I'm scared", "They don't like me" or "I wish I wasn't here."

Ask your child to focus on experiences that have worked well and try find positive messages that he can say to himself when he is in an unpleasant situation. These self-mottos will challenge the negative thoughts that may pop up when he meets new people and can boost his self-confidence and self-esteem.

#### **Positive thoughts your child could think**

- It is their problem not mine.
- I don't have to listen. I can walk away.
- I know I am great just the way I am.
- My friends like me the way I am.
- I have made friends. I will go and find them.
- I am good at football. I will find someone who wants to play with me.

### **Step B: Making friends**

Making friends begins with looking and being looked at. Other children at your child's school are likely to look carefully, perhaps with surprise and interest at him. They may ask a question, or they might look away because they are not sure how to respond. Equipping your child with an explanation for his CMN and teaching him how to move the conversation on will get any curiosity out of the way and enable your child to get on with the business of making friends.

Also, although you may be used to answering questions for your child, or even pre-empting these by providing an explanation, you will not always be around, and your child needs to know that he can cope with these situations on his own. Explaining things in his own way will increase his self-confidence amongst his peers and the sense that having a visible difference is OK. Preparation can make this step easier for you and your child.

#### **Help your child to find his own explanation**

- Sit down with him and discuss the words he likes and dislikes.
- Write down a few things he likes (he needs a variety of responses, including an 'explanation' statement and a 'moving the conversation on' statement).
- Let him choose his favourites. He can write these on a card and keep it in his pocket or pin them up on his bedroom wall or keep them somewhere special.
- When he is comfortable with them, let him try them out. Try an easy situation first (e.g. with a friend, one person at a time, when you are nearby).
- Ask him how it felt and make any changes to help him feel more confident.
- Remind him who he can turn to when things don't go so well or when he feels low.

### **EXAMPLE**

- Ben wrote down a variety of responses, including an explanation and ideas for moving the conversation on: “I was born with a large birthmark. It doesn’t stop me doing anything. Do you want to come and join in the game?”
- Sophie practised her chosen explanation at home with the whole family so everyone becomes familiar with using the same explanation: “I have CMN. It makes my brown skin itchy, but you can’t catch it. I have cream to put on that makes it feel better. Most of the time I forget about it. I really like your drawing. Do you do drawing at home?”

As your child gets older, his ability to use a variety of explanations and to know what works best will increase. At this point, you may need to sit down and help him develop some more responses.

### ***Learning key social skills***

If your child can master these key social skills, he will be able to take the initiative when it comes to joining in and making friends:

- Greeting people by name with eye contact
- Smiling and making eye contact
- Asking to join in a game that others are already playing
- Asking someone else if they would like to join with what he is doing
- Suggesting a shared game or activity
- Starting a conversation or changing the subject with a question.

The best way to teach your child these skills is by modelling them yourself when you are out with him. Some children will pick it up quite naturally from watching you whilst other children may need more encouragement and step-by-step guidance, maybe making it into a game.

### **STAGE 1**

Start with the simple skills like smiling and saying hello. Get your child to try smiling and saying hello to people and ask him if he notices what the other person does. 9 times out of 10, he will get a smile back and we all know that we are more likely to try things again if we get a positive reaction! The next step is to let your child know that he did a good job and that he should try it on his own next time. It’s OK to let your child know that smiling can make him, and the other person feel more at ease, which makes him in control of the situation.

### **STAGE 2:**

Start speaking with your child, when they are relaxed, about how they can start to make friends. Ask your child if there is one child at school that he would like to get to know. What is it about this person that he likes? What does this child like doing? This is something that he could use to start talking to the other child. He could ask a question, or just comment: “You’re really good at drawing” or “You’re playing a good game of footie.” Other skills include asking if they can join in a game by saying “Good game. You don’t mind if I play, do you?”

Your child's teacher could introduce him to one or two of the social skills listed above and ask him how many times he can notice the other children doing these things. When he's ready, the teacher could decide with him which of the skills he wants to try first and set a target for the week ahead, giving him a safe environment to try his new skills out in. He can then develop these skills in other situations as he grows in confidence.

You could also ask your child's teacher about the Circle of Friends approach which helps a child to develop social skills with the support of the peer group through shared activities.

### **Supporting your child to develop these skills**

- Find children who like similar things.
- Invite some classmates your child gets along with round to play.
- Encourage your child to join a club where he can enjoy a hobby or sport of his choice, as well as making friends and building confidence, self-esteem and a sense of achievement.
- Organise for your child to meet other children with CMN (through Caring Matters Now Support Group or by attending a family day event).

## **Step C: Preparing the school**

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 a visible difference can present including the name of your child's condition, how it affects him and any medical or special needs that your child has.

1. Contact your child's teacher or the head teacher and request a meeting to share this information about your child.
2. Ask your child's teacher to run an information session for all the staff in collaboration with you so that they are skilled in using the Explain-Reassure-Distract technique. In this way, the school staff can model how to handle curiosity from other children, other parents and new staff members in a natural and straightforward way that you and your child are happy with.
3. Organise regular meetings with your child's teachers to find out how he is managing socially.
4. You can also let your child's school or nursery know about the teacher's guide *Caring Matters Now Support Group* has available.

### **THINGS YOUR CHILD'S TEACHER COULD SAY**

- "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?"

## **4 TEASING, NAME-CALLING AND BULLYING**

Most children become more sensitive about appearance as they grow older and more judgmental about the appearance of others. Teasing, name-calling and bullying can involve calling someone a name, making fun of someone, picking on someone, taunting them, pushing or hitting them or getting someone to do something by threatening them.



Children who look noticeable within a group are particularly vulnerable to being on the receiving end of taunting and teasing from other children, but it is important to stress that just because your child has a CMN, it does not mean that he will automatically be teased or bullied.

## What to look out for

- Your child is avoiding going to school by complaining about being sick or he is refusing to attend a specific lesson or activity (e.g. swimming, sports).
- A sudden falling out with friends that your child does not want to explain.
- Your child says, "It's nothing," but shows you through feelings and behaviour that something is upsetting him.
- A sudden change in behaviour like withdrawal or lashing out, bed-wetting, nightmares, crying himself to sleep, poor marks at school.
- Unexplained bruises or scratches, torn books or clothes.

## Dealing with it

The advice to 'ignore it' is not an effective strategy as it is important to reinforce a child's sense that adults can help and to increase his feelings of control and confidence. All reports of teasing, name-calling and bullying should be taken seriously and unkind behaviour should be challenged by an adult (e.g. parent, care giver, teacher).

If you are present, be firm and understanding. Let the other child know that it is not OK to name-call, threaten or bully and let them know what behaviour you would like to see. You may want to speak to their parent, carer or teacher.

### How to support your child

- Teach your child positive self-talk and encourage him not to react to name calling because bullies thrive on a reaction.
- Teach your child how to walk away from a situation: Look confident, walk as calmly as possible, use positive self-talk ("I can spend time with people I like." or "I will go and find my friends.") and discuss with your child a safe place or person to go to.
- Encourage your child to stick up for themselves by using the 'fogging' technique to respond to verbal taunts: Look confident, use a calm, friendly and puzzled tone of voice, use rehearsed phrases - "So!" or "Excuse me!" or "And the point is?", then walk away feeling in control.
- Encourage your child to talk about his feelings about bullying.
- Encourage your child to play and hang around with supportive friends.

If teasing and bullying is taking place at school, contact your child's teacher in the first instance to let them know. Find out how they can help in line with the school bullying policy and be clear about what you expect to see happen. If your child experiences ongoing difficulties with bullying at school, it is important to seek further support and advice on how to manage the situation effectively.

## 5 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 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."

## 8 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. Details on the Caring Matters Now website <https://www.caringmattersnow.co.uk/support/support-contacts/>.