

Support guide for school staff promoting acceptance of appearance diversity

From speaking with teachers, it is clear there are concerns regarding discussing the topic of appearance diversity. This brief guide aims to support school staff to feel more equipped to discuss the topic and successfully promote appearance diversity within school.

This guide has been developed with qualified primary school teachers.
All information in italics are direct quotations from teachers.

"I think it's a big thing, I imagine, for everybody, especially nowadays when we're all striving to be very politically correct and fearing offending people, but I think knowing what language is appropriate and what you can and can't say... the best way to explain things to the children, almost give you like a do's and don'ts would be really helpful."

- Teacher

"We haven't had any official training. I think it would have been helpful and I think in the future it will be helpful because there's always a worry isn't there, you know, when you're addressing more sensitive topics ... particularly if you don't have experience of something yourself."

- Teacher

"It's such an important topic area, I think, for the children to be involved in and engaged in."

- Teacher

"It would just be better to be educated properly on what to say and how to teach the children."

- Teacher

"I think the main thing for me is the language. I think I'd personally feel a lot more comfortable having these discussions if I'm clear in my head of this is how I should respond, and this is the language that I should use."

- Teacher

"I think it should be part and parcel of education, full stop."

- Teacher

What is appearance diversity?

Everybody has different appearance characteristics, and no two people are the same. Promoting appearance diversity includes positive recognition and acceptance of all appearances, despite their individual characteristics. A number of characteristics make up one's appearance. Some are protected in the UK under [The Equality Act \(2010\)](#), including sex/gender, race, disability, religion/belief and sexual orientation. However, some are not, including weight, height, hair colour and changes to appearance as a result of injuries or medical conditions (e.g., burn, eczema and amputation). Appearance diversity can also include behavioural or social characteristics which may indirectly impact how someone appears to others (e.g., learning difficulties and socio-economic status).



Why consider appearance diversity in teaching?

Research shows children as young as 4 years can have negative attitudes towards others because of how they look ([Parnell, Williamson, Lewis & Slater, 2021](#)). This is important as appearance based-stigma can negatively impact children's overall self-esteem and quality of life. Young children's worlds are small, and therefore it is important to acknowledge and include all types of diverse appearances within teaching in order to tackle this issue at an early age. [A UK government report](#) tailoring The Equality Act for schools (2014), requires schools to engage in Positive Action to alleviate disadvantages experienced by those with protected characteristics. Although not all variations in appearance are protected, fostering a general acceptance of all appearances throughout teaching is a useful way to provide Positive Action and generally support children's wellbeing.

Aim of this guide

Although teachers are increasingly aware of the need to discuss and acknowledge diversity, they also express fears and anxiety regarding the topic.

However, teaching staff often find there's

"no time"

& *"there isn't the money"*

for resources

Therefore, this guide is brief, and free for teaching staff to access easily. It identifies teachers' common concerns regarding this issue and suggests ways to overcome them, with an overarching aim for teachers to feel comfortable to tackle this topic in celebration and acceptance of appearance diversity.



Discussing Diversity

“You had to tread even more carefully with everything you said, and you just didn’t want to say the wrong thing” – Teacher

When discussing appearance diversity teachers often worry about *“saying the wrong thing”*. Understandably people want to avoid causing offence or sending the wrong message. Therefore, this section will acknowledge the difficulties teachers experience and help teachers feel more equipped with their language.

Remember:

- Words and phrases can go in or out of common usage, leaving people unsure about what is acceptable. This means that we all need to be aware of the potential to unwittingly cause offence and to be prepared to acknowledge when we get things wrong.
- Identified characteristics are personal to people. Therefore, it is important to respect, listen and value how people identify themselves above and beyond more general terms.
- This is only a guide and use your own discretion regarding each context – you know your class/students best!

Not singling anyone out

Teachers also expressed the need for *“some really good training on how to navigate it sensitively, so the child doesn’t feel excluded”* and the importance of *“being able to teach the children about this without making it about anybody that they know or anybody specific”*. This can be tricky for teachers if, for example, you have a majority white class and only one black child when engaging in activities for Black History Month. However, this should not mean the topic should be ignored. In instances like this, keep the topic broad and don’t single out the child who is black. The same applies for other appearance diversities. Another way to address appearance diversity subtly is to weave it into the lessons, see the ‘Do’s and Don’ts’ below for further details.

Terms/language to avoid

Remember: context, legal guidelines and individual preference can also impact what language to use. Language evolves so this is not a set-in-stone list for all time. Broad groups of appearance characteristics which teachers discussed as important are outlined, although there are many ways people vary in terms of appearance.

The following page includes a terminology table. People have varying degrees of experiences and this table aims to get everyone on the same page with appropriate language and terms to use. If you hear another member of school staff using terms in the ‘what not to say’ section, you can use this guide as a tool to help them understand appropriate alternatives.



Warning – There are some terms included that are considered offensive but have been included in this list for clarity and to explain why they should not be used.

Characteristics

Race

Terminology around **race** is complex. Race is drawn up on the basis of physical markers (e.g., skin colour) and like gender, is a socially constructed term. When discussing **ethnicity** this includes a mixture of markers e.g., physical: 'black,' religious: 'Jewish' cultural: 'Irish traveller' and geographical: 'Asian' to differentiate between groups. See [Show Racism the Red Card](#) for further details and a more comprehensive list of what not to say.

Non-white – this term centres race around 'white,' it alludes to othering of other races that are not white.

Coloured – historically used to segregate black people as a form of othering anybody who was not white.

Half-caste – widely disliked term.

Gypo or Pikey – both offensive terms to describe someone from the gypsy or traveller community. The term 'pikey' derives from the word 'turnpike' a device used to collect tolls and meaning 'to go away from, to go on.'

Assuming **gender** has to be the same as **biological sex** – **gender** is a social construct that includes roles, toys, clothes etc. and although gender often aligns with someone's **biological sex**, gender is not fixed and can be chosen and defined by the individual themselves.

The disabled/handicapped – describing people as their disability can be dehumanising and label them as their difference.

Suffering with/victim of – these descriptors assume pity and negativity.

Scarred/Burned etc. – avoid labelling an individual by their visible difference (e.g., the burnt boy), this can be demeaning and label the individual as their difference

Victim/tragic/unfortunate – there are a number of connotations around visible differences alluding to pity/negativity. Avoid language of pity when describing visible differences (e.g., awfully burned, has a baddie on their face). Descriptions of visible differences should not include these adjectives.

Fat– although some activists advocate the term, it has a number of negative connotations and therefore is best to be avoided in an educational context.

Unhealthy – avoid linking higher weight to individual unhealthy behaviours, these stereotypes are highly engrained in society and often lead to direct blame towards the individual. Weight is impacted by multiple factors which go beyond the individual themselves so labelling someone of higher weight as unhealthy is unhelpfully not including the bigger picture.

Alternative

It is better to refer to the person's identified race/ethnicity (e.g., **Black, Asian, South Asian**). **Ethnic minorities** is the preferred collective term for all ethnic groups, except white British ([UK Government](#)).

Other common umbrella terms used (but not supported by the UK government) are, **Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME), Black and Minority Ethnic (BME)** or **People of Colour**.

People with **Mixed heritage/ethnicity** and **dual heritage** is often preferred.

The term **Gypsy, Roma** or **Traveller** may be used, but proceed with caution as there are many Gypsy and Traveller groups.

Use people's preferred pronouns. If unsure of an individual's identified gender and preferred pronouns, **use their name or they/them/their**.

Has a disability/has a condition – these firstly emphasises the people and then condition. The term '**disabled people**' is also viewed as an acceptable term by the British Council of Disabled People's organisation.

Visible difference is the preferred use for the community who have an altered appearance either at birth or via an accident or surgery. **Facial difference** is the preferred term for those who have a visible difference on or around their face.

Has a cleft/birthmark etc. – Keep language non-judgmental and avoid adding adjectives of pity/negativity.

The term **disfigurement** is mainly used in legal settings and 'severe disfigurement' is a protected term under the Equality Act 2010. See [Changing Faces](#) for more details.

Of **higher weight** – this term is associated with fewer stereotypes; however, weight is currently very stigmatised within society and there are still a number of highly endorsed stereotypes. Ultimately weight does not singularly equal health, so avoid discussing weight with a child (whether lower or higher weight) and when discussing health consider **all** aspects, not just weight (e.g., mental health, sleep etc.).

Gender/Sex

Disability

Visible Differences

Weight

Responding to questions

“When other children ask questions, I have to choose my language very carefully” – Teacher

Children are naturally inquisitive and ask questions/make comments. When responding:



1. Consider if the person in question is in earshot and respectfully respond to these questions and not shy away from them.
2. Use matter-of-fact language when appropriate (e.g., ‘Maia has a cleft lip’ or ‘Tiago is black’) in the same way you would do age: ‘Kahn was born in 2009 and is 12 years old’.
3. Chastising children for asking genuine questions or comments is unhelpful and can lead to further stigma and judgement towards certain appearances.
4. Don’t judge someone beyond the facts (e.g., do **not** say: ‘Emer has a bad burn, it must be awful for her’).
5. Emphasise kindness and acceptance.

Examples:

Why does Jamie have that mark on their face? (related to a birthmark)



Jamie has a birthmark on their face. Birthmarks are something people are born with and can be any size, colour or place on the body. It doesn't change who Jamie is as a person.



We shouldn't be asking questions about that. Jamie has a baddie on their face, and it must be difficult for them.

Why is Leo a different colour to me? (Leo is Black)



Leo is black. People are born with different appearances like hair colour, eye colour and also skin colour. These are important parts of our identities (how we see ourselves) but so are other things like our personalities and how we treat others.



Leo is a non-white person. We shouldn't be mentioning people's skin colour as it's irrelevant.

Why does Ms Rahman have her hair covered? (Ms Rahman is a Muslim woman)



Ms Rahman wears a headscarf because she is a Muslim woman and hair coverings are a part of her religious faith.



Why don't you go and ask her?

Why is Freddie fat?



We should not be using the word fat to describe someone; this word has been used a lot in a negative way to hurt other people's feelings. Bodies come in all different shapes and sizes, it's important to remember that all bodies are good bodies and that we should not be assuming anything about a person because of their weight.



Perhaps he has a condition, or his family don't feed him healthy foods.

Why does that person only have 3 fingers? (condition is unknown)



I'm actually not sure. There are some conditions which people are born with which leads to a visible difference on the hands and there are some cases where people may lose or have a finger(s) removed in their lifetime. Because we do not know the person's story, we cannot say for sure, but it is important to not be shy about these things and make sure we take time to learn.



We shouldn't be pointing out things like that, they must find it terrible, so it's important to not draw attention to it.

Georgie wants to be a girl now (George was assigned male at birth but is identifying as a female).



Yes, Georgie is a girl. Most of us when we are born are either male or female, but gender isn't fixed and can be whatever we identify it as, so we should all respect Georgie and say she/her instead of he/him now when talking about Georgie



It's very confusing isn't it? He was George one day and now he's Georgie.

✓ Do's and Don'ts ✗

Do respond to all appearance-based bullying the same

As not all diverse appearance characteristics fall under the Equality Act, your school may not have the same procedures in place to tackle appearance-based bullying regarding weight in the same way it does with race, for example. Nonetheless all bullying based on appearance can be harmful for children's body image. All appearance-based bullying needs to be taken seriously with the same procedures followed, irrespective of the reason for the bullying.

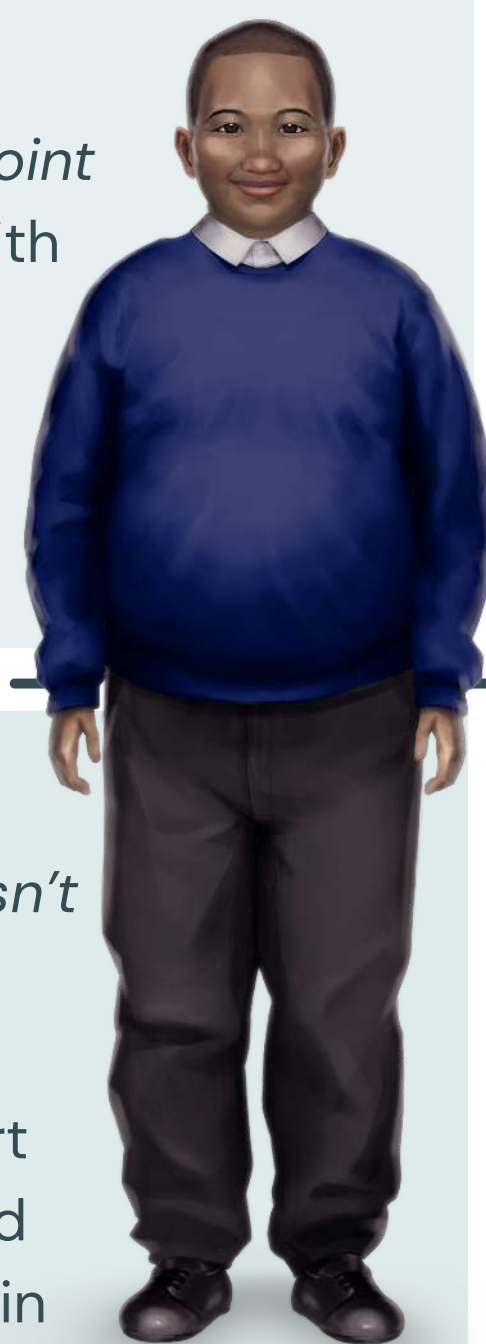
How? Ensure your school has a no tolerance approach towards all appearance-based bullying.



Don't speak negatively about your own and others' bodies

It is important that you model to children how to be kind and non-judgmental towards your own and others' bodies. Do not berate your own body in front of children e.g., *"I might stand up, because I've got a bit of a spare tyre, and I might point out at me 'I've got a bit of a spare tyre here."* This can be difficult if you struggle with your own body image but speaking kindly towards your body can have a positive impact on you and is actively role modelling good body image for the children.

How? Be aware of your own body image and beliefs, making sure to reflect on your own feelings and how these may impact the children.



Do weave in diverse appearances through representation

Consider subtly representing other appearances in the images you use whilst teaching – *"It doesn't necessarily have to be a stand-alone topic to be discussed it could be woven through different elements of the curriculum. Sometimes I feel like addressing the specific issue, or the specific problem, can almost draw more attention to it and make it stand out more."* A good place to start could be as simple as showing different people. Representing different appearances in books and videos can help increase exposure. This is important if you have a range of diverse appearances in your class, but also extremely important if you do not: *"If children aren't naturally exposed to diverse appearances in their school, in their community, where they live, then later in life they may be less accepting or have less understanding or be more ignorant to differences."*

How? Include books, toys and displays which represent more diverse appearances. When using images, videos and resources in class actively look for ones which represent a range of different appearances. See the resources section in this guide for a head start.



Don't avoid the topic of diversity

It is apparent teachers feel similarly that this topic is tricky and are unsure how to navigate it. Teachers are *"worried about saying something wrong"* but also *"don't want to seem naïve that we don't know enough."* This can lead to a mixture of *"wanting to tackle it but also, it's kind of easier to just avoid it because then you don't upset or offend."* Avoiding acknowledging or discussing diversity can lead to further taboo and stigma towards certain appearances. Therefore, it is important school staff have honest and open conversations about how they would like to include diversity of appearances. These conversations need to be held in a safe space and allow school staff a chance to express fears and ideas for this topic.

How? Set up a support group with other staff to have these discussions. Use this guide as a starting tool.



Helpful Resources

A good starting point for primary school staff...

Charities/Organisation Resources:

Disabilities/Visible and facial differences

Changing Faces: <https://www.changingfaces.org.uk>

Race

Show Racism the Red Card: <https://www.theredcard.org>

Body Image

Book: [Body Image in the Primary School](#) by Nicky Hutchinson and Chris Calland.

General

EqualiTeach: <https://equaliteach.co.uk>

EqualiTeach Topic	Description
Reject Racism	A collection of recommended anti-racism resources and tools. https://equaliteach.co.uk/for-schools/classroom-resources/reject-racism/
Free to Be	Celebrating LGBT+ Equality and tackling homophobia, biphobia and transphobia https://equaliteach.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/FREE-TO-BE-rev5.pdf
Universal Values	A teacher's resource for responding holistically to the requirement to promote Fundamental British Values. https://equaliteach.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Universal-Values-Update-2020.pdf
Faith in Us	Educating young people on Islamophobia. https://equaliteach.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/FAITH-IN-US.pdf
All Inclusive	Tackling Disability-Related Bullying in Primary Schools. https://equaliteach.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ALL-INCLUSIVE.pdf
Reflecting Diversity in the Classroom	A bank of recommended books for teaching about issues of equality and diversity. Early years included. https://equaliteach.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Reflecting-Diversity-in-the-Classroom.pdf

Sources of Reference

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<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/equality-act-2010-guidance>.

Department for Education. (2014). The Equality Act 2010 and schools. GOV.UK
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/315587/Equality_Act_Advice_Final.pdf

Parnell, J. Williamson, H. Lewis, F & Slater, A. (2021) Children's attitudes and friendship behaviours towards socially stigmatised appearances: Do attitudes vary according to type of difference? *Stigma and Health*.

Show Racism the Red Card (2013) Anti-Racism Education Pack. <http://www.theredcard.org/resources-and-activities/>



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