

REACH Returning to Education and Continued Healing



Managing Questions and Stares

A Guide for Educators and School Personnel*

*NOTE: This includes teachers, counselors, psychologists, nurses, principals, coaches, group leaders, and other school personnel

Managing Questions and Stares



- Children with visible differences often become aware early on that others respond to their appearance in various ways, such as:
 - Showing curiosity, concern, upset, or surprise
 - Making comments
 - Asking direct, personal, or potentially upsetting questions
 - Staring
 - Looking, but then quickly looking away
 - Asking if they need help

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Managing Questions and Stares



- It is natural for educators to want to protect their students
- You cannot shelter your student by having them avoid others or by trying to prevent questions or staring
- You can teach yourself and your students how to think about and react to these expected situations

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Managing Questions and Stares



- Teaching a student how to respond to stares and questions gives them necessary skills to cope with vs. avoid social situations
- Since burn injuries are only one of many types of visible differences, it may be helpful to do this training as a classroom discussion so all students benefit
- Guide discussions so students with disabilities or visible differences are not singled out

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What You Can Do to Help Students



- Plan for situations when others ask questions or stare
- Develop effective responses
- Change or redirect the conversation
- Practice responses
- Get others involved
- Learn to manage rudeness

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#1 Plan for Situations

- Remind students that most people stare because they are curious or concerned
- Realize that other people do not cause a student's feelings or reactions; instead it is how an individual thinks about a situation that forms their feelings
- Since students cannot keep people from staring or asking questions, help them learn how to deal with questions and stares in a positive way

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#1 Plan for Situations

- Children learn from watching adults and listening to what they say
- It is very helpful for educators to show patience with initial curiosity from others, and provide simple courteous responses to questions
- Responding positively to curiosity and questions teaches your student how to respond the same way



#1 Plan for Situations

- Have students identify situations where they have seen others stare and ask questions, such as incidents:
 - Within the classroom or school setting: gym, cafeteria, playground, hallways, bus, sports field, locker room, etc.
 - Outside the school: on field trips, in the neighborhood, during public extra-curricular activities, etc.
 - In books, television shows, or movies
 - In current events: newspapers, news, or social media



#2 Develop Responses

- Emphasize the importance of preparing a planned response to questions and stares
- Discuss potential questions that might be asked and specific responses a student could use
- Plan answers that give enough information and reassurance to others, without going into details (unless your student chooses to)



#2 Develop Responses: Example Questions and Answers

- What happened to you? *I was burned. I am better now.*
- How were you burned? *It was a house fire.*
- How did it happen? *We don't know how the fire started.*
- Why do you look like that? *My skin looks different because my hand and arm were burned.*
- Does it hurt? *It did before, but not now.*
- Why do you walk like that? *One of my legs is shorter than the other from the burn injury. I have a brace on my leg.*
- Why do you wear that thing? *My injured skin is still healing.*



#3 Change or Redirect the Conversation

- After the initial response, teach your student to prevent additional comments by using statements that redirect the conversation to something else
- Have your student generate a list of statements that change or redirect the conversation by:
 - Showing interest in the person who asked
 - Changing the subject
 - Ending the conversation
- For more ideas, refer to the Changing Faces "Explain-Reassure-Distract Technique": www.changingfaces.org.uk



#3 Change or Redirect the Conversation

- Examples of statements that will change or redirect the conversation:
 - I have to get going. Have a nice day.
 - Thank you for asking. How are you?
 - What after-school activities are you in?
 - Does your teacher give you a lot of homework?
 - I have to catch my bus.
 - We're here to learn about history, why are you visiting the museum today?
 - Our team has 3 more away games this year. Where else is your team playing?



#4 Practice Responses

- The more that a student practices, the easier and more automatic their responses will become:
 - Ask them to look for situations where kids are dealing with questions or stares
 - Ask them to bring in examples of good (and not as good) responses from books, TV shows, or movies
 - Discuss these observed situations as a group
 - Have them pair-up and take turns practicing possible responses on each other



#5 Get Others Involved

- Encourage other teachers, group leaders, coaches, and school personnel to learn about responding to stares and questions by reviewing the REACH website
- This group of supportive people can help students by responding to situations in a positive manner, such as:
 - Giving a simple explanation or comment
 - Changing the conversation to something else
 - Ending the conversation



#6 Managing Rudeness

- Most people who stare, ask questions, or make comments are doing so out of curiosity or concern
- Students may occasionally encounter someone who is rude, reacts in an upsetting manner, or asks too many invading or personal questions
- Students will feel more confident about dealing with these situations if they plan a response for such encounters



#6 Managing Rudeness

- Discuss why it is important for students to respond, but not get into arguments or hostile behavior
- Teach students to be assertive and make simple statements, such as:
 - "Please don't stare."
 - "I feel uncomfortable."
 - "You can ask a question if you are curious."
 - "I don't want to talk about this anymore."
 - "I don't feel comfortable discussing that with you."
 - "That is too personal of a question for me to answer."



#6 Managing Rudeness

- Sometimes others will make rude or unkind comments
- Such comments must be addressed. You or your student can respond by saying:
 - "I do not like it when you make such cruel remarks."
 - "My student may look different, but she can hear what you are saying. It is very hurtful to both of us."
 - "I will not listen to your comments. Good-bye."



#6 Managing Rudeness

- Encourage students to speak with a teacher or other adult when others have been rude
- Signs that a student may need extra coaching or help in managing questions, stares, or rudeness include:
 - Feeling overwhelmed or upset about dealing with the reactions of others
 - Reacting to questions or staring with aggression, hostility, avoidance, regression, or crying
 - Avoiding situations and locations where they encounter new people or people who have previously been a problem



Age Considerations: Children 2-6 Years Old

- Children as young as 2 years old will notice visible differences in appearance
- Young children may have difficulty putting their questions or concerns into words
- Instead, it is reflected in their behaviors such as:
 - Staring intently or pointing
 - Abruptly walking up and touching
 - Running away, hiding from, or avoiding a child who is different



Age Considerations: Children 2-6 Years Old

- They may not understand visible differences in appearance, and in fact may misinterpret what it is or why it happened
- Questions or comments from young children can seem strange or surprising, such as: *Why does she look wrinkly? Am I going to catch what he has? I can't play with him, he's got scary things on him.*
- Provide simple explanations to their questions



Age Considerations: Children 7-11 Years Old

- Peer acceptance becomes very important in this age group
- They can be very critical of themselves and others
- A child's self-confidence can be greatly affected by other people, comments, situations, or events
- It is important to discuss situations where others have stared, asked questions, or were rude to assess how well your student is dealing with things



Age Considerations: Children 12-17 Years Old

- Youth in this age group have many concerns about appearance, how they look, and how they will fit in
- Mood swings and inappropriate behavior can be triggered by events involving staring or rude comments
- Recognize that youth of this age are better able to express themselves and can discuss complex ideas



Age Considerations: Children 12-17 Years Old

- Be honest and direct with your students when talking about visible differences and sensitive subjects
- Be respectful of your students' opinions, thoughts, and feelings even if you don't agree with them
- Encourage independence in their ability to handle things, while supporting them in planning responses to new situations, such as: new groups, employment, advanced education, and personal relationships

