
 **REACH**  Returning to Education and Continued Healing



Social Skills Training for Visible Differences

A Guide for Educators and School Personnel*

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



Social Skills Training for Visible Differences

- There can be concern that a student's injury, disability, or visible difference may impact relationships with others
- Children must learn to positively and comfortably interact with others, make friends, maintain friendships, and go out in public

Social Skills Training for Visible Differences



- All students need social skills training on:
 - Meeting or interacting with people who have a disability or visible difference
 - Responding to the reactions of others to their disability or visible difference
- Refer to the Parent's modules on "Going Out in Public" and "Meeting New People" for more details on basic social skills training

What You Can Do



To incorporate disability and visible differences into social skills training, you must:

1. Learn about the student's specific condition
2. Understand basic psychological and social issues that impact a visibly different child
3. Explore your own feelings and reactions
4. Learn how to help students with visible differences practice social skills



#1 Student's Specific Condition

- Learn about the student's injury or condition, including its short and long-term impact on appearance and physical or cognitive function
- Observe how the student's condition influences their social interactions
- For example: Burn scars on the face may cause a child to be unable to smile or frown. Limited facial expressions can make it difficult for others to interpret how the child is feeling (happy, angry, sad, etc.).



#2 Psychological and Social Issues

- Children with differences in appearance and function are concerned about others' reactions, including:
 - Staring, comments, or questions about their appearance or condition
 - Reactions of shock, fear, embarrassment, or pity
 - Being left out or excluded from group activities
 - Teasing or bullying
 - Avoiding going out in public or meeting new people because of previous bad experiences



#2 Psychological and Social Issues

- Children may report a variety of feelings about the reactions and attention from others, including:
 - Nervous, embarrassed, or self-conscious
 - Acknowledged, recognized, or being special
 - Anger, hostility, or upset
 - Sadness, anxiety, or being overwhelmed
 - Pride they are able to handle tough situations
 - Isolation or feeling alone
 - Wishing to be “normal”





#2 Psychological and Social Issues

- Family functioning and their provision, or lack of provision, of social support impacts a child’s psychological-social adjustment
- Parents may need help or training in understanding:
 - The importance of social skills training
 - Specific social skills needed by their child
 - Their important role in reinforcing and practicing social skills development with their child





#2 Psychological and Social Issues

- Students who are learning how to deal with social situations need:
 - Confidence that they know what to do and say in a variety of social situations
 - Opportunities to talk with supportive and knowledgeable adults about how to meet and deal with people
 - Practice meeting new people and interacting with others in a variety of situations and environments





#3 Your Feelings and Reactions

- Educators can have a variety of feelings when interacting with a child who has a burn or other disfiguring injury
- Identify pre-existing assumptions you may have about injury, disability, or visible differences
- Take time to assess what you are feeling and discuss it with others as necessary
- Seek assistance if you are struggling with how to best help your students deal with visible differences





#4 Helping Students Practice

- Help your students to assess their current social skills and identify areas they need to develop and practice
- Assess your skills and comfort level in responding to others when they stare at, make comments, or ask questions of your student
- Create opportunities in the classroom and school environment for students to practice meeting and interacting with others





#4 Helping Students Practice

- Be prepared to demonstrate the social skills that the students will need to use to manage teasing, meeting new people, going out in public, and handling questions or stares
- The “Explain-Reassure-Distract” technique can be used with any age: www.changingfaces.org.uk
- For additional specific examples, refer to: the “Teasing and Bullying” module and the Parent’s “Going Out in Public” and “Meeting New People” modules





Age Considerations: Children 2-6 Years Old

- Young children are very curious and direct. They show curiosity by touching, staring, making bold or direct statements, invading personal space, etc.
- To facilitate social skills development, respond to them in a simple but “matter of fact” manner:
 - Explain: Tracy’s hand looks that way because she has burn scars.
 - Reassure: She is better now.
 - Redirect: Tracy likes to play soccer. What other fun things do you like to do?





Age Considerations: Children 2-6 Years Old

- Group activities can be used to discuss appearance and visible differences
- Discuss the variety of possible differences children might have vs. focusing on a child’s specific disability
- Help students talk about and focus on strengths (what a child is able to do) vs. what a child is unable to do, including positive inner qualities and physical abilities





Age Considerations: Children 7-11 Years Old

- Children of this age are more thoughtful, can have stronger emotional reactions, and may worry more about their body image. They can also be more judgmental about differences.
- Social skills building will help to deal with these issues
- Encourage students to participate in school groups and extra-curricular activities to increase opportunities to build social skills





Age Considerations: Children 7-11 Years Old

- Books, TV programs, and movies can be used to discuss how others meet people, make and maintain friends, and deal with social interactions
- Provide opportunities to practice more complicated social skills, such as:
 - Initiating a conversation with others
 - Moving conversations with others beyond surface similarity and differences
 - Handling differences in opinions and feelings



Age Considerations: Children 12-17 Years Old

- Appearance and style becomes very important during the teenage years
- Looking “right” and belonging can be a major source of anxiety and can impact learning and performance
- Openly discuss the issue of making judgments and comments about another student’s appearance, without focusing solely on disability or disfigurement



Age Considerations: Children 12-17 Years Old

- Use a supportive, problem-solving approach to encourage students to discuss ways they can respond to the comments and judgments of others
- Provide opportunities for students to practice interactions in a safe environment
- Continue to use class lessons, books, TV programs, and movies to discuss how others meet people, make and maintain friends, and deal with social interactions

