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When Your Child Starts Or Changes Schools

Adapted from an article by Dr. Arlette Lefebvre which appeared in the AboutFace newsletter, Sept/Oct. 1995

Is there any way I can help new classmates see my daughter's strengths and abilities, rather than focus on her appearance differences?

Should I prepare the school for my son's facial difference, even though he doesn't consider himself as really different from any kid his age?

Many parents face the same questions and uncertainties when their child enters a new school or new peer group. While there is no single formula for successful integration, there are many wonderful transitions tips:

- When it comes to handling differences, always stress the fact that each face is unique... some just happen to be more distinctive than others. Yes, some faces stand out in a crowd and that makes people notice them more. But many "ordinary faces" would give anything for the opportunity to stand out in a crowd, too. How you handle that extra attention and what you make of it is entirely up to you. If you can't fix it, feature it, and wear your face with pride!
- Preparing classes ahead of time, through the AboutFace school program, Facing Differences or Jessie's Blessing for example, can help a lot by giving students a chance to learn about their thoughts and reactions to appearances and acceptance. Little would be gained by having a lecture about your child's medical condition before she/he meets the new classmates. Just focusing on the medical jargon and what's "wrong" with your child's face is not likely to accomplish much except scare the other kids off.
- Do share every bit of medical information you can get your hands on with teachers and principals! Invite them to case conferences at the hospital and let them know how much you appreciate their mentorship and faith in your child's potential! Partnership in education and health care is your goal. Think positively and expect nothing but the best intentions from each and every one of the professionals dealing with your child. Treat people as trusted allies, and they will very often rise to the challenge.
- Set an example by modeling calm and matter-of-fact reactions to unexpected and sometimes rude comments or stares of strangers. If your child is about to meet many peers and teachers, you may choose to gradually expose her/him to the reactions of a greater number of strangers, in excursions to shopping malls, camping trips, new hobbies or extra curricular activities. Finding the right answer for the unexpected question or comment should be treated like a challenge to be met, not something to be feared or whispered about.
- Making friends out of curious strangers, and spreading enthusiasm for what you believe in; these things are acquired skills. Some of us just have more opportunities to perfect these skills than others. The trick is to make them focus on what you excel at, rather than what you don't.
- Never underestimate the power of self-confidence. If your child has done really well and has been accepted by his/her peers so far, chances are that's what she/he expects will happen in the years to come. There is a lot to be said for the magic of positive expectations. You may be old enough to remember sudden turns for the worse in your own life, but sharing these past disappointments or



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fears will not likely help your child tomorrow. Think positively and confidently, and that's the way your child will perceive him or herself and react in the face of special stresses.

The AboutFace School Programs

FACING DIFFERENCES is an interactive program designed for elementary aged school children grades 2 to 8. The program's independent format gives educators accessibility and flexibility to direct learning on diversity issues.

JESSIE'S BLESSING is a picture storybook and interactive CD for children ages 3-7. It teaches and promotes acceptance.

If you would like more information to take to your child's school, please call us at 1-800-665-3223 or e-mail at info@aboutface.ca, or visit www.aboutface.ca to see a full list of our resources and publications.

AboutFace is a national charitable organization dedicated to helping individuals with facial differences and their families. We support individuals whose differences are present at birth or acquired as a result of disease or trauma. If you or someone you know has a facial difference and would like more information, contact AboutFace at 1-800- 665-FACE or www.aboutface.ca.

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