



A Teacher's Guide to Supporting a Student with a Facial Difference

AboutFace developed this guide with the assistance of children, parents/guardians, and educators. It includes information and tips to help you create a comfortable and supportive environment in your classroom for any student with a facial difference.

What is a Facial Difference?

A facial difference refers to anyone whose appearance, from the neck and above, has been affected by a congenital (present from birth), acquired (occurs after birth), or episodic (comes and goes) condition or syndrome. There are over 100 types of facial difference, ranging from craniofacial conditions to scarring to eczema. More than two million Canadians are living with a facial difference.

Facial difference affects every person differently. A facial difference may affect the way a child speaks or their learning, behaviour, or social abilities, as well as how society perceives what they are capable of. However, contrary to what adults and children may assume, many children with a facial or other difference are not developmentally impaired. As with all students, it is important for educators to understand each person's unique abilities and needs to better support them in achieving their goals.

Preparing to Welcome the Student

EDUCATE YOURSELF

When you know that you will be welcoming a student with a facial difference to your class, it will be important to educate yourself on the student's condition or syndrome in advance of meeting the student. You can also look to community organizations such as AboutFace for more information on what you can do to maintain a safe and inclusive place for the student. This guide is a good first step, and additional resources are available on the AboutFace website, focused on a variety of topics.

LOOK AT PERSONAL ATTITUDES AND BIASES

Find time to check in with yourself and fully register your own reactions when you meet the new student with a facial difference. What are your assumptions or beliefs about appearance or difference? What are your hopes and fears for this student? You may feel shocked, uncomfortable, angry, concerned, or touched with pity by a student whose appearance seems unusual. Recognizing your own attitudes and biases about appearance and facial difference will help lay the groundwork for fostering a trusting and non-judgmental relationship with your student.



TALK TO THE CAREGIVERS

It can be helpful to meet the caregivers in advance of meeting the student, especially those of young children. Caregivers may wish to share information that will make the student's transition easier. Meetings and discussions will allow you the opportunity to ask direct questions related to the student's difference, academic history, learning style, and other special needs—without reservation. Ask what the family calls their child's condition or syndrome and how they describe it.

You can also collaborate with the caregivers to create a plan for how to handle any issues that may arise for their child in this new—school—environment and also to ensure the student receives the care and support they need. Caregivers may use strategies or phrases at home that you could also use in the classroom. Older children could be involved in these discussions.

Agree in advance on a form of communication that works for both you and the caregivers to keep each other informed of any issues that may arise or for general communication. They may be anxious to know about how their child is coping and integrating into the classroom throughout the year.

BUILD POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Changing schools or starting a new grade is a natural time of anxiety for most students. This anxiety is heightened for a student with a facial difference because they may be anticipating possible reactions from others about their difference. Meeting the student in advance will go a long way to helping the student become comfortable with you as the new teacher and will encourage a rapport early in the relationship. Do not hesitate to ask the student what they think they need from you.

You can ask older students about how they describe their difference to other people who might be curious, or if they prefer to not talk about it. You can also ask the student if, and how, they would like you to respond to other students' questions (see the section "Respond to students' questions" below).

TALK ABOUT DIFFERENCES WITH THE STUDENT'S PEERS

Before a new student with a facial difference joins a class, you may have a general conversation with other students about differences. It is ideal to get consent from the caregivers of the student with the facial difference before having this conversation and to ask them what information might be important to share or not share.

Some teachers give presentations about differences in learning styles, differences in how people's bodies look and move, and other aspects of diversity and difference. These conversations can be used to teach students about inclusion and acceptance, as well as to clearly set limits about what is acceptable versus unacceptable behaviour with those who have differences. Many students are comfortable speaking about their difference, and they may want to do a presentation themselves. This can be an empowering experience for them. It is best to check in with the student to see what they prefer.

Creating an Inclusive Classroom Environment

USE PEOPLE-FIRST LANGUAGE

People-first language emphasizes the individuality, equality, and dignity of people with disabilities. Rather than defining people primarily by their disability, people-first language conveys respect by emphasizing the fact that people with disabilities are first and foremost just that—people. Never define the student by their facial difference, always notice the person first. Try to reinforce the concept that the person is most important, and the condition is secondary: for example, refer to the student with Treacher Collins Syndrome (TCS), not the TCS student. Always refer to the student by name and avoid referring to their difference, unless it is an important piece of information for the issue at hand.

RESPOND TO STUDENTS' QUESTIONS

It is natural for children to be curious about another child's appearance; they will ask questions, look closely, or reach out to touch. Treat their interests as a question. Take account of whether the new student can respond to other students' questions on their own or whether they would like you to do so.

If the new student needs support in answering questions, be prepared with responses that you have agreed upon through discussion with them and/or their caregivers. A brief and straightforward answer will satisfy most children, then you can find a natural way to move the conversation on. For example, if a student asks, "Why is their face like that?" you might say, "Milo has a scar. He was hurt, but he is OK now." Or you might say, "That's the way Norma was born" or "Thomas has one big eye and one small eye. His eyes are blue. What colour are your eyes?".

By modelling answers in this way, you can help students with a facial difference learn when and how to speak up for themselves so they can do this when they are ready. You are also modelling to other students how to have respectful conversations regarding differences.

ENCOURAGE EMPATHY BY DISCUSSING DIFFERENCES AND DIVERSITY OFTEN

It is important that teachers not deny the physical differences that students notice and are curious about. Some may naturally have fears or anxieties about people with facial differences and will need support to express and address these concerns. Give students opportunities to practise appropriate ways of asking questions about facial difference. Encourage students to be sensitive in satisfying their curiosity and also to explore ways of getting to know people before asking personal questions.

Emphasize that people are individuals who represent themselves, not a group, and each person is uniquely different. Ensure classroom learning activities and resources enable students to go beyond stereotypes around appearance and difference.

It is also important to help your students become aware of how stereotyping and discrimination operate at individual, institutional, and societal levels; in this way they can begin to consider how changes in these attitudes can be made and to explore the role they can play in this process.



EDUCATE THROUGH THE LENS OF INTERSECTIONALITY

Children with a facial difference have intersecting identities; they can belong to more than one marginalized group and may experience discrimination based on multiple grounds. For example, children with a facial difference may belong to a racialized or Indigenous community or a different socioeconomic group than their peers, may have mobility impairments, and/or may identify as LGBTQ2S+. Two students with facial difference and also a different racial or religious background will have unique experiences, even though they have an identity in common.

It is important to acknowledge and support students' diverse identities. Create a learning environment and lessons that are accessible and relevant to all your students; let them see their identities and communities reflected in their education. Challenge students' misconceptions, and remember there is more to a student than their facial difference.

You may want to consult with your school's child and youth counsellor, or other appropriate staff members, as they may have suggestions on how to incorporate intersectionality in the classroom in a way that is easily understood by your students.

BUILD SELF-ESTEEM

Children with a facial difference sometimes struggle to have positive and enjoyable social interactions, and this can lead to low self-esteem. Like other students, those with a facial difference might attempt to manage these feelings by exhibiting undesirable behaviours.


By maintaining a classroom culture of belonging and anti-bullying, you can help set the stage for all students to feel they are an essential part of the classroom and that everyone brings a unique perspective. When possible, model self-compassion and self-acceptance in front of your students. Using a strength-based framework in the classroom can be very positive, not just for students with a facial difference but for all students.

Teasing and Bullying

Although most children will experience a form of bullying at least once in their lives, children with a facial difference are likely to experience these behaviours more often than their peers, due to the way they look or because of other differences. On a recent survey we conducted, 82 percent of caregivers expressed concern about their child being bullied or teased at school. If the student being bullied is not supported, these actions can negatively affect the social, mental, and emotional health and well-being of the student.

Students with a facial difference experience the following forms of bullying most often:

Staring—a form of non-verbal intimidation. Students with a facial difference may find they frequently experience long, intimidating stares. For example, each time the student looks up in class, another student is staring at them. This could happen because of curiosity, not malice, but needs to be addressed.



Taunting and name-calling—happens when someone makes fun of another person with the intention of hurting their feelings and provoking a negative reaction. For instance, taunting occurs when someone repeatedly asks, “Why do you look like that?” or “Where are your ears?”; and name-calling draws attention to a student’s facial difference by calling them hurtful names (e.g., calling a child with a craniofacial difference a monster). This can be done unintentionally or even appear to be said in a friendly manner; however, even microaggressions need to be addressed.

Social exclusion—includes spreading rumours, ignoring, gossiping, and excluding a child by not letting them play or join the peer group. For example, a student might say to a student with a speech difference, “Anyone who talks with a lisp can’t play with us.” Or the student with a difference may not be invited to have lunch with others because of their difference.

Cyberbullying—takes place over text messages, social media, email, and internet sites. Bullies can remain anonymous while sending damaging messages, pictures, or videos to a student with a facial difference or by distributing these to a wide audience.

KEEP AN EYE OUT FOR “SILENT” TEASING OR BULLYING

Teasing and bullying can occur in front of teachers unnoticed. Keep a sharp eye on non-verbal or “silent” forms of teasing or bullying, such as staring or social exclusion. Students may also purposefully engage in bullying outside the classroom (e.g., during recess, in the hallways, online) to avoid being caught by teachers. Therefore, as with all students, it is important to look out for any signs or behavioural changes that may indicate a student with a facial difference is being bullied.

Teachers can encourage general classroom discussions on teasing to increase awareness and non-tolerance. Teachers can also facilitate discussions on the meanings of ingroups and outgroups and the moral and emotional implications of social exclusion.

TAKE A COMPLAINT SERIOUSLY

Very often students with differences (facial or other) will avoid telling caregivers and teachers about any teasing or bullying they are experiencing. Sometimes they worry their caregivers will overreact, or they do not want their caregivers to have further cause for pain. When a student does step forward to ask you for help, take the disclosure seriously and listen to their concerns. Often the issue is a serious problem and can be a threat to the student, which is why they might be seeking adult support.

Each school will have its own policies around bullying and how to manage situations. We hope that you will consider this information alongside your school’s policies.

Accommodations for the Student

TALK WITH THE STUDENT ABOUT ACCOMMODATIONS NOT IN PUBLIC

A student may encounter unique challenges in the classroom due to disabilities related to their condition, such as hearing loss, visual impairment, or physical limitations. Some students may need longer to move between classes or may need to sit in a particular place in the class. You can open the conversation with the student in several ways: for example, “Would it be helpful to sit at the front of the class so the board is closer?” or “I just want to check in and ask if you can hear me well.”



MISSING SCHOOL FOR APPOINTMENTS

Often students with a facial difference require regular medical appointments or major surgical procedures. Be aware of the impact this can have on academic learning and social relationships, and try to make accommodations when possible.

PROJECTS INVOLVING BABY PICTURES

It's important to be aware that this might be challenging for students who have had significant changes in their appearance. It might be helpful to connect with the student and their caregivers to see their comfort level. This is also a good opportunity to highlight the importance of embracing our differences, and for students to learn to share about themselves in a safe space.

Connecting with Other Professionals

With the consent of the student's caregivers, you may be able to contact the professionals who assist the student, such as a speech-language pathologist, an audiologist, or another member of the student's healthcare team, and also meet with community or school board resource personnel. The student may have already worked with special education teachers, child and youth counsellors, and social workers. These professionals may be able to offer you insight into the student's previous experience in school, their strengths and abilities, and also share effective strategies that have been used previously.

Transitioning to Secondary School

Many students experience anxiety around transitioning to secondary school, but this can be a time of heightened anxiety for those with a facial difference. They might worry about losing friendships from elementary school and having to make new friends, or they may be excited or fearful about the opportunity for a fresh start. They may also be concerned about staring, questions, and comments among so many new peers. Some additional transition planning and support may be required to prepare for this new school environment.

To support the student during this transition, advise caregivers and/or the student to meet with the new school's student services or resource department before the student begins their first semester. This will help them identify and discuss any programming and support needs the student may require. You can also provide the new school with a written note that includes information and tips on the student's learning style and needs.

You Make a Difference

Thank you for investing your time to understand how to support students with a facial difference! A positive and accepting approach to your student's difference can encourage other students, educators, professionals, and visitors to model the same. Students and their families are always appreciative of teachers' efforts to create a positive learning experience. With the right support, accommodations, and environment, children with a facial difference can overcome any challenge they encounter and achieve their full potential in the classroom. AboutFace is here to offer additional support and resources. Please visit our website or reach out with any questions.



A B O U T F A C E®

Who We Are

AboutFace is a national charity and our mission is to cultivate equity and opportunity for individuals with a facial difference through supportive programming, advocacy, and education.

If you would like more information or support, please contact us or visit aboutface.ca.

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