

## Social Acceptance

Social acceptance is as important for your child as it is for other children. It influences their behaviour, how they interact with others around them, how they think of themselves, and can impact greatly on how they perform in school. Your child's degree of self-confidence, itself stemming from their level of self-esteem, will have a significant influence on how they are accepted socially by their peers. Consequently, what you can do to reinforce your child's self-esteem will have a significant influence on your child's ability to lead a full life now and later in their teenage and adult years. It is important that you acknowledge and respect your child's feelings and opinions, be understanding and supportive, as such demonstrations of love and care will instill in your child a sense of self-worth, of belonging, of being wanted and loved.

## Adolescence

Teenage years are always years of great uncertainty. Physically there is the development of sexual organs etc. Teenagers take on the adult physique. Their emotional growth is often slower than their physical growth. It is a time of great stress and uncertainty.

The adolescent who has a cleft lip and/or palate, or indeed any physical difference, may not realise that all teenagers go through feelings of uncertainty and insecurity in new and unfamiliar social conditions, and may attribute such feelings to having a cleft.

At this difficult stage, all teenagers need support and reassurance that it is normal to feel a certain amount of self-consciousness and insecurity when entering the "social scene" for the first time.

Set down certain boundaries for your teenage offspring and encourage them to take responsibility for their actions. Given support, guidance and encouragement, adolescents learn to feel at one with themselves and to enjoy successful friendships at college, work and socially.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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### TITLES IN THE SERIES:

1. *About the Cleft Lip and Palate Association of Ireland*
2. *What is Cleft Lip and Palate?*
3. *Questions and Answers for New Parents*
4. *Feeding Issues for New Parents*
5. *Speech and Hearing Concerns*
6. *The Genetics of Cleft Lip and Palate*
7. *Dental Health and Treatment*
8. *Surgical Treatment for Cleft Lip and Palate*
9. *Social and Psychological Aspects*
10. *Handout for Teachers and Carers*

Leaflets are available by post from the Association or can be downloaded from [www.cleft.ie](http://www.cleft.ie).

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## Cleft Lip and Palate Series

### Social and Psychological Aspects



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## Child Development

As an infant, a baby learns about the world through its needs being met e.g. being loved and nurtured. Through its parents a baby learns to trust and to explore their world. Gradually the maturing child gains more independence but continually returns to parents for security and reassurance.

## How? What? Why?

are questions asked continuously, especially at 4 years of age. At 5 years, a child chooses his / her own friends. At 8 years, a child is sensitive to criticism especially in front of others. This also happens at the adolescent stage.

## Instilling Confidence

It is important that your child be comfortable with their specific facial difference and to view that difference as they would any other physical feature. Children who look visibly different are more vulnerable to lack of confidence and worries about their appearance. They need to develop additional skills in order to deal with the reactions of others to their appearance, as well as coping with the feelings of vulnerability and low self-esteem that may arise, on account of their condition.

You the parent can help your child by:

- *Allowing your child to express his or her negative feelings and/or worries.*
- *Allowing your child to see that you too are affected by the negative reactions of others towards them.*
- *Modeling active ways of coping, e.g. making the first move in explaining their appearance, pre-empting / responding to staring by making a brief reference to their condition - "I was born with a funny lip and had surgery to fix it"; "This is called a cleft lip, have you ever seen one before?"*

Having something ready to say will make your child feel much more in control. But practice is required

before your child feels confident enough to use the strategy in a real life situation.

It is not helpful for parents to:

- *Refuse to face up to the possibility of negative reactions by others to their child.*
- *Tell their child to "just ignore it", which leaves the child feeling attacked and hurt.*
- *Expect their child to be super competent and to "just get on with things".*

By talking to and educating your child about their particular facial difference, you will help prepare them to do the same with others, as inevitably they will be required to do. Your child should not feel self-conscious about anything that differentiates him/her from others. Having the confidence to face questions or indeed derision will depend to a great extent on how the issue of their being born with a cleft has been handled in the family circle and among their early childhood friends.

**Remember: Children need to be taught active coping strategies.**

Do not deprive your child of social interaction, indeed encourage mixing with other children from an early age so that your child can learn to handle different situations, and so that other children too will readily accept your child as they would any other.

## Comments from other children

Children are always curious about people and things that they perceive as different. They ask direct

questions. Unlike adults they do not avoid the obvious. A confident and self-assured response by your child to an initial question from another child about their cleft will influence to a great extent how that child will respond in return. Most children will be unfamiliar with your child's condition, and questions are often asked out of curiosity, not ill intent. Once they are given a reasonable answer children will usually continue what they are doing, their curiosity satisfied, and nothing more is thought of it. If parents of children who differ in some way from their peers give their children a reasonable explanation about the difference that they can in turn tell their friends, then the chances of teasing and name-calling can be reduced.

## Teasing

Teasing may often raise its ugly head at specific points in a child's life such as when starting in a new school, following surgical revision, or after the placement of an orthodontic appliance (e.g. braces). Many children encounter teasing and bullying during their school years. Children who look visibly different are more at risk of teasing and bullying by their peers. It is important that your child learn to understand such behaviour and how to deal with teasers and bullies. You as parents have an important role to play in teaching your child how to cope with such unsocial behaviour.

It is equally important for your child to understand that the occurrence of such behaviour may have nothing to do with the presence of a facial difference, and that such behaviour is instead a reflection on those who perpetrate such behaviour. Understanding that such behaviour is often a reflection of another child's lack of self-esteem and a pointer to problems they themselves

may have will help your child retain their own self-esteem, and not be unduly affected by the behaviour of others.

You can help teach your child how to deal with unwelcome attention by knowing something of what the bully or teaser is trying to achieve. A bully is attempting to provoke a reaction, to upset the victim, often wanting to get the victim into trouble. They may be trying to impress their peers so as to increase their own chances of acceptance.

To quote Kathy Kapp-Simon, paediatric psychologist, "Your child can deflect the teasing by refusing to give the desired response and instead reacting in an unexpected way. Generally this means teaching your child to look at the teaser directly and letting him know how he feels about the teasing. Body language and tone of voice are very important when delivering a response - often more important than the words that are used. A statement such as "I don't like being called names; I have better things to do than listening to your taunts" delivered in a calm, but firm tone of voice that demands respect and followed by your child's determined movement toward a group of friendly classmates will often deter the teaser. To be effective, children need to practice responding to teasing in a safe environment, either at home or with a trusted teacher or counselor at school."

Given that parents of children who are being teased are not always aware of the fact, there is a certain imperative upon you never to underestimate the possible influence of the cleft on your child's psychological well-being.

