

Help with Social Situations

Where do we start?

A healthy social life starts with healthy self-confidence. When parents teach their kids to feel good about themselves, they give them the tools they need to form friendships. There are a lot of things that parents can do and say to help a child feel confident. Starting at an early age, parents can praise a child for some of the positive things she/he has done in everyday life. The best topics don't relate to appearance. Parents might say to a toddler or young child, "You shared your snack with your brother after he spilled. That was kind!" or, "You know so many things about dinosaurs! You have such a good memory!"

Children born with facial differences may also need to have certain skills, like how to respond to questions or comments about their appearance or speech.

How can parents teach their kids about cleft lip and palate?

Before kids can talk with others about their condition, they need to understand it. Parents should have open and honest conversations with their child about cleft lip and palate (CLP).

Photos are a great teaching tool. Kids need to see pictures of themselves before and after surgery. This will help them understand the changes that have happened over time and think of them as normal. Looking at the family album is fun. It is also a great way to encourage questions. As you talk with your child, remember to talk about hearing, eating/drinking, and speech. Children need to know that there is more to a cleft than what they can see in a photo.

Another way to start a conversation is to ask a child about experiences with others. A parent might say, "We talked at the doctor's office today about your lip. Has anyone at school ever asked you a question about your lip or about your scar?"

The information you share with a child can come from the booklets and factsheets from ACPA Family Services, or from conversations with your child's surgeon and team. Parents should use simple, honest language and accurate terms. Remind your child that he/she is not alone. There are a lot of other kids going through the same thing.

Also, don't forget that children learn from all the people who are close to them in their lives. Does your child spend a lot of time with an older sibling, grandparent, or other caregiver? It's important to talk with these people about your child's cleft lip and palate.

How can parents set an example?

Children listen and learn from how their parents talk about cleft lip and palate. The way you answer questions will be the way your child does, too. Children start learning from you at a very young age.

First, consider the audience. A parent might say to another adult, "My child was born with a cleft lip and palate. S/he had surgery to repair it. S/he's doing really well now."

There will be days when you feel less patient or just not in the mood to explain. In this case, you might give a simple but straightforward response. Something like, "I don't feel comfortable answering that" or "I understand that you're curious, but I don't want to talk about that right now."

Parents need to be aware of their own feelings, too. If you feel ashamed of your child's condition, your child will know it. It is important to resolve those feelings. Support groups can help parents with feelings of guilt, shame, and isolation.

How can parents help a child respond to questions?

Parents should explain to their child that it's normal to hear questions from other kids. You might say something like, "Kids are curious about a lot of things. They ask questions about things that happen, new things they see, and people they know."

Parents can then give an example of something their child was curious about recently. "Remember when you asked about...? Sometimes other kids are curious about how people look. So, they might ask questions about that, too." Parents can also explain that usually, people ask questions out of curiosity. In most cases, people are not trying to be hurtful. If a child expresses discomfort or sadness about these questions, parents can assure him/her that those feelings are okay.

How does practice help?

If a peer asks your child why she/he looks or sounds different, she should be ready with a response. Parents can help a child prepare and practice. Practicing takes away the surprise. It can help children born with CLP feel more comfortable talking about their difference. It can also increase their confidence. Practicing is a good way to help the conversation go well.

Parents can ask their child, "What would you say if someone asked you what happened to your lip? Let's practice. I'll pretend I'm asking you that question."

Which words are best?

As children grow, they should learn the correct terms associated with CLP. This will make it easier for them to answer questions with confidence.

The goal is to find words that tell the truth in a comfortable way. Families can develop a "script" for a child. The script might have three parts:

1. Acknowledge the difference.
2. Give a brief, simple explanation.
3. Move on.

For example, a child might say, "Yes, I have a scar on my lip. I had surgery when I was little for cleft lip and palate. It doesn't hurt me. Do you want to go play?"

Parents can help a child decide which peers to share more or fewer details with. In some situations, a child can be very brief (as with the sample sentence, above). A child may choose to share more details with close friends.

How can parents help with teasing?

Unfortunately, teasing does happen. It is common for parents to feel angry with the children who tease or even angry with their parents.

First, talk with your child. Ask how she/he feels about the situation and wants to handle it. You could find out: Who did the teasing? Was it a friend, a classmate, a stranger, or a school bully? What was it about? Was it a mean comment, a joke that went bad, or a remark based on lack of understanding?

After talking it through, you and your child can decide how to respond, both now and later. A child might choose one of the following options, based on the situation: Don't engage at all.

- Ignore it/walk away.
- Engage briefly.
- Tell the person "Please stop" or "That's not nice," or
- Provide information, like, "After having surgery, the body heals with a bumpy red line which is a scar," or
- Remind the teaser that these experiences are unique and show strength, not weakness.

Whatever the response, it is important to do it with confidence, both in tone of voice and body language. Summer camp can be a great resource for teasing. Some kids enjoy going to camp for kids born with CLP. The kids at camp often do a lot of sharing about how they handle teasing and bullying. These kids also tend to stay connected throughout the year.

What about more serious situations?

If your child is being bullied, or if the teasing doesn't stop, it may be helpful to involve other children's parents, a teacher or school administrator, or a health care professional.

Professionals on a child's craniofacial team may be able to help with a specific situation. Federal law protects students from harassment based on a medical condition. Many states also have laws that protect students from bullying.

Parents should remind their child to always talk with parents after being teased or bullied. A child can talk about what happened and how she/he handled it.

How can parents speak with others?

Many parents find it helpful and reassuring to talk with other parents of kids born with cleft lip and palate. There are many support groups on social media. Another option is to connect with a family in your area. Ask the coordinator on your child's team for information.

Where do we go from here?

The ideas in this factsheet are just a starting point. There are many other resources that can help a child feel better about handling social situations. Kids can benefit from this support, even for situations that don't seem "serious." Local resources might include teachers and other school personnel, a child's pediatrician, members of the cleft team, and psychologists or counselors.

Special thanks: Members of the ACPA Family Resources Committee
Subject Matter Expert: Celia E. Heppner, PsyD
Editors in Chief: Ron Aronovich, DMD and Lynn Fox, MA, MEd, CCC-SLP
Managing Editor: Leanne Magee, PhD
Associate Editors: Doug, P. Olson, DMD, MS and Carol J. Ritter, RN, BSN
Writing Consultant: Amy Mendillo

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