

Cleft Lip and Palate Service

Building your child's confidence

Information for parents and carers



Leeds children's
hospital

caring about children

When a child has a cleft, a common worry for parents is whether their child's confidence will be negatively affected. Parents also worry about how their child will cope with the reactions of others, particularly when starting or changing schools.

It is completely normal for any child with or without a cleft to have times when they feel less confident. For example, when separating from parents, transitioning into school or making friends.

What is confidence?

Confidence means feeling happy about who we are, what we do and what we can achieve. Confidence will help your child feel prepared for life's experiences. It will help them to develop good relationships and try new opportunities, rather than stepping back from them.

When things do not work out at first, confidence will help your child to give it another go. It will help them to discover and develop their abilities. When your child sees what they are capable of and then takes pride in their achievements, their confidence becomes stronger.

This does not mean that they will be confident all the time. Your child can gradually learn to develop confidence as they grow older. It is normal for all of us to have situations that challenge our confidence throughout our lives.

Maybe you can think of a time when you were a child and struggled with confidence. As an adult, you can probably think of several moments when your confidence has been low. For example, when having to do something new or when things are not going to plan.

A confident child:

- Likes and value themselves a lot of the time
- Appreciates their own strengths and limitations
- Is becoming more aware of their emotions
- Is developing control over their emotions
- Is developing the skills to make and keep friends
- Is learning how to get their thoughts and needs across to others
- Is learning that they can rely on their skills and strengths to handle different situations
- Is able to get through everyday challenges like tests and competitions
- Usually thinks "I can" rather than "I can't"



Visible difference and confidence

As your child gets older, they will become more aware of the things going on around them, including the ways in which they might be similar and different to others.

Having a visible difference, like a cleft, can make your child feel different to other people. Sometimes, feeling like this can be hard. It can make them feel less confident. You might notice a big change in your child's usual behaviours and emotions that suggest they are struggling with low confidence.

Children who are low in confidence might be less likely to try new things or get to know new people. They might be less likely to try again if they have failed at something once. They might shy away from their friends and family and spend more time worrying about their difficulties.



Talking about difference

Talking about any difference openly can support your child to feel accepted. Talking in a relaxed, confident, matter of fact way will show them that their cleft is not something to be ashamed of.

Looking at baby photographs can help your child understand their cleft and is an opportunity for you to talk about it, using **simple and age appropriate language**.

If you do not know the answer to a question they have, be honest! Say you do not know, but that you can both try to find the answer. Looking on the CLAPA website or speaking to someone from their Cleft Team will be helpful.

It is important to remind your child that their cleft is only a part of them. As you know, your child has lots of special and wonderful qualities that make them who they are. Being born with a cleft is only one of those qualities! It is also important that you remind your child that everyone is different and unique in their own way. Although everyone is not exactly the same, your child will have many things which are the same as those around them. For example, the things they like and enjoy.

You can help your child build a positive view of themselves and to feel valued by the things you say. For example, labelling the qualities your child has by telling them that they are brave, funny, caring and so on. Acknowledging that everyone, including you and other family members, have different strengths and difficulties can also help.



“Sophia, you’re so funny and caring. You cheer up those around you when they are feeling a bit sad. Thank you for cheering up your younger brother just now”

Talking openly about your child’s cleft will support them to feel they can turn to you when they want to **share thoughts, feelings, experiences,**



or fears. It is important they feel comfortable talking about these, because it provides opportunities to:

- Help your child to think of different ways to manage any concerns or expectations.
- **Praise** your child’s effort – even when something doesn’t go well. Acknowledging how your child attempted something, rather than focusing on the end result, can support them to recognise their ability to bounce back from difficult situations. The more specific the praise, the better. For example, **“I really liked how you were brave and went to talk to that little girl. I know it didn’t go as you planned, but I’m really proud of you for being kind to them.”**
- You can then also think through and plan how to manage any similar or new challenges they may face in future.

Trying different activities

Having lots of opportunities to be around others and learn new skills can help your child to discover who they are. By trying different activities and then talking about these with you, your child will begin to learn what they enjoy and what makes them feel the most confident. These opportunities can also help them to develop their ability to bounce back from difficult situations.

Examples of activities include:

- Attending toddler groups
- Playdates
- Outings with friends
- Swimming
- Cycling
- Arts and crafts

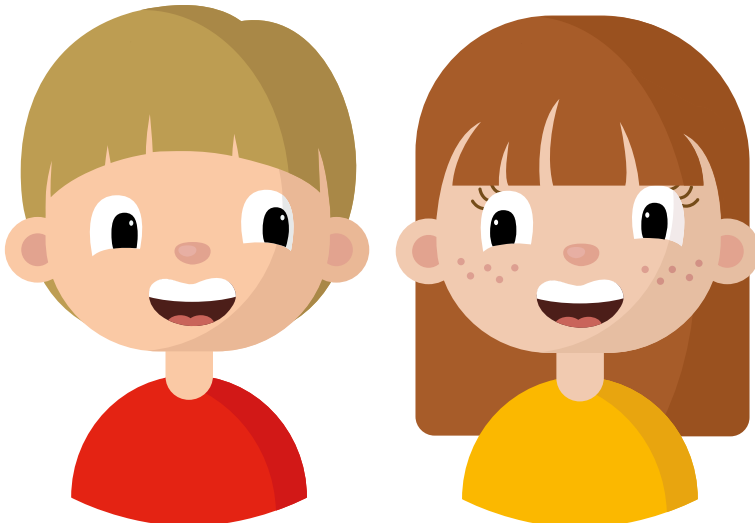


Dealing with reactions from others

Many people with a cleft experience different reactions and comments about their appearance and sometimes their speech.

Children and adults may have never met someone who has a cleft. Some may stare or have questions to ask. It is normal to look slightly longer if you see someone who has a scar or visual difference. Someone staring or asking questions does not mean they think the difference is bad, most of the time they are just being curious!

Your child may not experience this until school age, but it is important that they are comfortable with coping with possible reactions or questions from their peers. They will learn this from a very young age by watching your reactions to others and by building confidence around talking openly about their cleft. As you encourage interactions with others, participation in activities and open communication your child can grow up to be confident and proud of themselves and their cleft.



Resources for support and information

You may also find it helpful to read our 'Dealing with reactions from others' leaflet which you can request from the Cleft Team.

If you have any questions or need further support after reading this leaflet, you can contact the Cleft Team and Cleft Psychologists:

0113 392 5115

Yorkshire Region Cleft Lip and Palate Service

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These websites also have lots of helpful information and support:



www.clapa.co.uk



www.changingfaces.org



What did you think of your care?

Scan the QR code or visit bit.ly/nhsleedsfft

Your views matter



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